# ANOTHER CANON

## Indian Texts and Traditions in English

MAKARAND PARANJAPE



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Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
www.anthempress.com

This edition first published in India 2009
by ANTHEM PRESS
C-49 Kalkaji, New Delhi 110019, India
75-76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
244 Madison Avenue #116, New York, NY 10016, USA



ISBN -13: 978 81 907570 0 3 (Hbk)
ISBN - 10: 81 907570 0 8 (Hbk)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Pranab and Tom

# CONTENTS

# PREFACE

In my earlier monograph, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* (2000), I had argued that English novels by Indians had a more complex genealogy than was normally supposed. That they were the inheritors of two different literary traditions, English and Indian, and also of two linguistic ones as Meenakshi Mukherjee suggested by dubbing them 'twice born' is by now well-recognized. But what was not equally clear was how we might understand and evaluate their larger civilizational burden. For this, one needed to connect them not only with other fictional works in many Indian languages or with those forms of narrative, such as vernacular prose chronicles or romances, which came before them, but also to the classical literary traditions, particularly the great epics of India. If we did so, we would not only be closer to defining their identity but also to evaluating them.

My earlier project, which tried to do this, was thus an endeavour to 'define both the commonness and the uniqueness' of the Indian English [IE] novel (12) and to see 'how this genre has evolved and developed in the last 150 years' so as to delineate the 'tradition of the IE, to identify its main types, and to spell out its relation to the broader cultural formations of our country' (12–13). I argued that the age-old framework of the *purusharthas*, enunciated not only in the Manu Smriti or the Mahabharata, but also in Bharata's Natyasastra, could come in handy. Those novels which promoted the cardinal aims of life: Dharma, *Artha, Kama* and *Moksha* would be the ones which would survive the test of time. In addition, my book tried to offer a typology or a taxonomy of the Indian novel based partly on the framework suggested by Bhalachandra Nemade.

One of the responses to that monograph was that it was too theoretical and hardly contained any detailed readings of literary texts. In a way, this book of comprehensive readings, interpretations and expositions of select Indian English mostly fictional texts, is meant to redress that deficit. But the contents of this volume are by no means obvious or predictable. While some of the constituent texts, such as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, are not only well-known but also widely-studied, others, such as M Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage* are hardly known at all. Texts such as R K Narayan's 'A Horse and Two Goats' or U R Anantha Murthy's 'Clip Joint,' are not even novels but short stories, the latter originally written in Kannada. Mulk Raj Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury* and Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* are

non-fictional works, but with rich narrative content. Still others like Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us,* Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca,* and Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold,* though reasonably well-known and significant, are not considered canonical. In all, the texts discussed may at first seem a motley, if unusual, bunch.

Yet, on closer examination, we discover that they may actually constitute what we might call 'another canon'. This canon is 'another' in at least two senses of the word. First, nearly all the authors included are considered well-known, even canonical, though the chosen texts are not. So we might call this a reading of not so well known, though not necessarily minor works, by major writers. Such works, I believe, require careful study if we wish to understand not only these major authors or their better-known texts, but also the growth and development of Indian English literature itself. In the second sense, both the works and their writers are not well known, but even so I think that studying them is crucial to the larger project of making sense of Indian English literature. Why? – because these works at once, and sometimes paradoxically, exemplify both the strengths and weaknesses of this literature. Each of them is special and outstanding, even spectacular, in one way or another. But many of these works are also flawed so that, in the end, they do not fully achieve their potential. This invites us to wonder if such a failing to achieve full potency may be a generic feature of this literature.

'Another canon' also consists of books which, for a variety of reasons, are at once of vital importance and yet, in most cases, not actually studied. For instance, Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*, a minor work no doubt, but one that offers special, even prophetic political insights. Or Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* – especially accomplished as a literary artefact, but difficult to teach in classrooms. Or Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage*, an exceptional single text by an author who published nothing else and was practically unknown. Two texts, 'A Horse and Two Goats,' and 'Clip Joint', are crucial to the understanding of what we might call the Indian English mentality. 'A Horse and Two Goats' illustrates both the failures and the successes of English in India. A long short story set in England, 'Clip Joint,' tells of the narrator's disillusionment with Western civilization symbolized by a stripper in a London night club. Two major women novelists, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai are represented by one text each, not their best known. *Both Rich Like Us* by the former and *Journey to Ithaca* by the latter are fascinating, yet flawed texts as I shall show. Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury,* Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* are not even novels, but contain strong narrative and ideological overtones.

In addition, 'Another canon' also refers not only to the special selection of texts in question, but also to alternative ways of reading them. The chapter *Journey to Ithaca,* for instance, is an experiment in academic discourse, originally written in the form of a letter. The last chapter on the Stephanian school of writing is also a narrative going back to the college days of one of our most accomplished Indian English writer, Upamanyu Chatterjee. In one way or another, then, each chapter in this book looks a bit askance at its subject, either in its choice of text or in its manner of treatment. This is what makes this book an extended exploration of what it might mean to belong to another canon.

The overall purpose of this book, however, is not just to construct another canon but also to make sense of Indian textuality and traditions in English. It engages with the India of the last seven decades or so, as it is constructed primarily through the English language. This India, grappling with modernity, constructed as it is through literary texts, is as much fictitious as it is real. It is a whole cultural and literary milieu, a mentality and mindset, a culturescape and ideology. It abuts into vernacular India, its Other, through a two-way translation process. On the one hand, it translates Indian culture into English in 'original' works and, on the other, renders texts from Indian languages into English translations. Hence, the India that is invented or represented through these works is what my book is really about.

As we read these texts cumulatively, a picture of this India gradually emerges, which is rich, complex, and many-dimensional. It is an India which both anglicizes itself but also nativizes English in very unusual ways. Each text at once brings into focus some facet or the other of this India. The most important of the latter is the ongoing struggle with modernization, both literary and social. Many texts touch on this issue, directly or indirectly. Naturally, it becomes crucial to my readings too. From the challenge of inventing a literary modernism in India, which Anand's encounters with T S Eliot grapple with, to an analysis of the mythos and ethos of St Stephen's College, this question looms large. I take a somewhat critical stand on Indian modernity, arguing that its failure to connect with the civilizational genius of India deprives it of enduring power and depth. The texts that it engenders, too, are consequently deficient in meaningfulness and value.

This book is also preoccupied with the traditions and techniques of these reconstructions of India, in fictional form and content. That is why I have endeavoured to read and explicate each text carefully and coherently so as to offer glimpses into larger questions such as the nature of the Indo–British encounter, culture and colonialism, resistance and native self

assertion, tradition and modernity, self and society, domination and autonomy and so on. To complement these readings of specific texts, one or two chapters also engage in broader issues and generalizations about the nature of Indian English writing. Overall, the book tries to offer a sketch of Indian English literary and textual practice over a period of seven decades.

The chapters are arranged on the basis of what I consider the decade under consideration and not necessarily the year of publication. The former does not always match the latter. For instance, Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury* is set in the 1930s in London, but was published only as late as 1981. Similarly, Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*, though first published in a French translation in 1965 and subsequently in the English original in 1976, is actually set in the 1940s around the Quit India movement. Consequently, it appears after *Conversations in Bloomsbury* as Chapter 3. Narayan's 'A Horse and Two Goats' was published in *The Hindu* in 1960, but appears to be set in pre-independence India. Anantha Murthy's 'Clip Joint,' published in 1973, is set in the 1960's. Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) is clearly an 'Emergency' novel, set in the 1970s, as is Blaise and Mukherjee's non-fictional travelogue *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) is quintessentially a 1980s California text, while the following chapter on Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) is a critical overview of the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. The only two texts which are not contemporary in their settings are Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage*, set in medieval Tamil Nadu and Nagarkar's *Cuckold* set in sixteenth century Rajasthan. Yet, Anantanarayanan's novel belongs very much to the decade of the 1960s even in so far as its publishing history is concerned. It is an unusual Indian text finding a one-off publishing slot in the Western market so much before the boom in Indian English fiction abroad. Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997), though set in a totally different age and time, may be seen to represent, somewhat atypically, the creative genius of the 1990s. The Introduction, which tries to situate the Indian English novel, is too large in its scope to belong to any particular decade, but sets the stage for the analysis of the texts. The concluding chapter on Stephanian writers is, properly speaking, set in the 1980s, but it is written from a perspective that only became available to me very recently, in the second half of this first decade of the twenty-first century. In that sense, it is really a looking back and garnering of experience and understanding. It is also the most autobiographical of the chapters so ought to come, I felt, at the end of the book as a retrospective finale to these explorations.

This book would not have been possible without support from many quarters. I am thankful to my colleagues on the Advisory Committee of

the UGC-Special Assistance Programme, Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru Univesity, for their cooperation and encouragement. I am grateful to the UGC-Special Assistance Programme for its support in the publication of this book. My thanks to my Project Fellows, most of whom are my students, for their help in proof reading and reformatting some of these chapters. I would like to thank and acknowledge the organizers of the seminars or conferences where some of these chapters were first presented and the journals or books where some of them appeared in earlier versions. I would also like to appreciate my publishers, Anthem Press India, especially the energetic, young and painstaking editors, for their contribution to this book.

**Makarand Paranjape**
Guru Purnima, 18 July 2008

# 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Situating the Contemporary Indian (English) Novel

The task of situating the contemporary Indian English novel will necessarily be a tentative rather than a normative one, marked perhaps by the sputtering, flickering, even involuntary exertions of the illocutionary subject. In fact, when I first wrote this Introduction.[1] I remember starting off by admitting that it had been crosshatched between two contrary discursive impulses, or should I say, compulsions – on the one hand, the cordial and insistent invitation to embark upon such an exercise and on the other hand, my own inner reluctance to undertake the kind of 'fixing' that the word situating implies. On further reflection, I think that the contrary impulses were deeper and had to do with the nature of the project of situating the Indian novel itself rather than merely the tussle between having to write and needing to remain silent, vocalizing and reflecting, going out and staying at home.

The word 'situate', itself has an interesting etymology. It may not be out of place to mention here that the tendency to use etymology to clarify what we mean should not be alien to us in India because our learned ancestors often resorted to *Nirukta* to establish meanings in Vedic exegesis. Thus, the recourse to etymology and derivations is not alien to our hermeneutic traditions. As an aside, we may bear in mind that *Nirukta* and etymology are not the same. *Nirukta* enjoins us to go to word origins, especially to the verb roots or *dhatus* of words in order to understand and interpret their meanings. Etymology, in Western tradition, usually implies the history of the development and usage of

[1] It was the Keynote Address delivered on 23 March 2002 to a conference on Contemporary Indian Novel at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

the word. But be that as it may, situate, is related to site, which goes back to the Latin word *situs*, meaning position or location. So to situate means to locate, to position, and therefore to define.

But the word *situs* is also related to *seed*, and comes from the Indo–European root *sei*, which suggests the sense of casting out, letting fall, as we would a seed. Site is thus related not only to sow, plant, deposit, scatter, but to semen. When we try to situate something, therefore, we try to trace it back to its seedling. This is one sort of etymological conclusion that we can draw. There is, of course, another kind which, to those who, after Michel Foucault, seek meanings not through continuities, but through discontinuities, would be far more appealing. To situate is also to cast out. The seed is situated when it falls from the fruit or flower to the ground, just as semen has to be ejected before it can fertilize an egg. Every act of casting out, of scattering, of dissemination is, then, also, as Homi Bhabha would remind us, an act of gathering, of coming together, of being reborn. That which is scattered, regroups elsewhere, in a different location. The word 'situate', then, suggests two contrary processes: being cast out and taking root, breaking off and breaking forth, dispersal and emergence, migration and colonization, departure and arrival.

Before venturing ahead, we need to bear in mind that every act of situating involves, at the epistemological level, some prior notion of causality. As I suggested earlier, the two senses of the word – to fall off and to be located – have built into them a complex causal relationship. Therefore, the first point I would like to make is that the manner in which we situate the Indian novel will depend on the kind of causality we subscribe to. Personally, theories which are predicated on various kinds of monocausality are unattractive. A sort of *anekantavada*[2] , which allows for multiple determinants of complex effects. Another way of putting it would be to propose that most ideologies (perhaps most people too) can be put into one of the two categories – the Hinayana and the Mahayana, or the lesser and the greater vehicle. The former adhere to literal, monistic and simple causality, while the latter to metaphoric, plural and complex causality. Of course, such a categorization may itself be seen as limiting and thus self-contradictory, but we must consider it for its heuristic efficacy. It will at once be clear to which category I wold like this very book to belong. From the Mahayana position of situating, it would stand to reason that the novel, both Western and Indian, ought to be situated in multiple ways. These ways may, moreover, reinforce or contradict each other. From this perspective, how we situate the novel will tell us something not only about the

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[2] '*Aneka*' means 'not one' and '*vada*' means philosophy, view, or –logy. So anekantavada means manifold view or non-absolutism or perspectivism. It is an important Jaina doctrine, emphasizing the many-sidedness of truth.

novel, but also something about ourselves. All such acts of situating will, thus, depend on how we are ourselves situated. Where the seed falls off from is then as important as where it falls to and places itself. To sum up, this exercise of situating involves three things – the situator, the situated and the situation. Such a process, consequently, cannot be either subjective or objective, but is, to invent a new word, multijective. I would therefore agree with Marthe Robert who, in her book *Origins of the Novel*, says that 'the novel is constitutively an "undefined genre"' (225).

With these qualifications in mind, we may turn to the main question before us: how to situate the Indian English novel. I might say that a similar question exercised literary historians and critics in the West for a couple of hundred years. The novel, a new form, as its very word implies, struck Europeans as something unprecedented, just as it strikes us in India as being something altogether new even today. In Europe, of course, after much debate, the consensus is that the novel embodies a new kind of consciousness, which is best defined as the outcome of the rise of individualism. This, as we shall remember, is Ian Watt's argument in *The Rise of the Novel*. The novel came to be distinguished from older prose or verse narratives that preceded it; it also supplanted the latter and became the dominant literary genre from the eighteenth century onwards.

In most European languages, the word for the novel is *roman*, which suggests its roots in the medieval romance, long, often fantastic stories involving aristocratic or supernatural personages, perhaps the best example of which is Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1350). Another important precursor to the Western novel was the picaresque tale, which emerged in sixteenth century Spain. The picaro was a rogue; the episodic and loose structure of his adventures became the basis for one of the major traditions of the later Western novels, including those by Cervantes, Fielding, Defoe and Twain. But what makes the novel special is that it embodied a new way of apprehending the world. This new way, called 'realism', has to do with complex characters, highly developed social structure, a plausible plot, in a word a certain way of capturing human experience. According to Watt, the 'defining characteristic' of this distinct form of writing is 'realism' which he explains as the 'position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses' (12).

Many years before Watt, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote what is perhaps the best work on the novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), he argued that the novel, especially the kind of novel that Dostoevsky wrote, represents something new and unprecedented in the history of human consciousness. In 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934–5), Bakhtin coined the now-famous phrase 'polyphonic novel' to describe this kind of writing. Bakhtin contended that Dostoevsky's characters were 'not voiceless slaves [...] but *free* people, capable

of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him' (*Problems,* 30). Bakhtin later considered polyphony to be characteristic of the whole genre of the novel itself. For Bakhtin, dialogism, which implied the interaction and interplay of at least two embodied voices, was the prerequisite for a new mode of consciousness that emerged in the novel. In his pioneering idea of the chronotrope, which is the matrix of presumptions about the works of time and space that underlies every text, Bakhtin makes a powerful case of the new consciousness that the novel embodies, a consciousness that at once necessitates a different idea of time, space, causality and human agency.

To sum up this section of my argument, I would like to suggest that the rise of the Western novel was an outcome of the rise of a new way of apprehending reality and that this new way was linked to the rise of individualism. Now individualism is not something that emerges in isolation of various social, economic, political and technological factors. Therefore, the rise of the novel was deeply interconnected with the rise of modernity itself, in all its diverse manifestations and ramifications. But if we stick to this one key feature, individualism, then we can see the progress of the Western novel as the history of the metamorphosis of the individual in Western society. Starting with the emergence of modern sovereign subject defined in terms of the rationalism of Descartes, the empiricism of Locke and Hume and the idealism of Kant, the novel has gradually moved to express less autonomous and stable versions of the self. From what might be generally perceived as the social construction of the self, to its inversion into less cohesive and more fragmentary portrayals of inner subjectivity, the Western novel may be said to have moved from outer to inner 'realism' in the last two hundred years or so. More recently, with the postmodernists' proclamation of the death of man, the novel has had to rely increasingly on its own codes of representation for its material. The movement, in other words, may be described as – society to self to language itself.

In contrast, I would argue that the novel in India has been deeply implicated not in individualism, but in some form of the larger collective to constitute which its initial energies were harnessed. Yes, the novel arose not so much to capture the emergence of individualism in India but to manifest the birth of a nation. A close examination of the conditions under which the form developed in India will support such an argument. We at once discern, for instance, that the rise of the novel in India was linked to certain conditions of colonialism, the chief of which is the spread of literacy and of the technology of printing. Print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson tells us, plays a key role in the imagination of the nation. Thus a new community is born which, though separated by time and space, conceives of itself as one. This is all the more remarkable because the people involved not only belonged to different places, but, in the case of India, were also separated by language, religion, caste and

other forms of primordial identity. In India, the novel, along with other forms of printed literary material, thus, played an important role in the formation and imagination of this community.

In other words, the rise of the novel in India is deeply implicated not in the rise of individualism but in the rise of a modern national consciousness. Of course, one might argue that the rise of national consciousness was also conducive to the rise of individualism or vice versa. That is, the new individual – bourgeois, liberal, Western educated – was also the champion of Indian nationalism. But the manner in which the two are interlinked and interdependent would suggest that we would consider Frederic Jameson's thesis of the third world novel as a national allegory a little more seriously. The fact is that the novel in India, had a much different role to play than in the West. Here it carried out a much greater investment in community building, while in the West, it's primary concern was with 'realism' and with the creation of individual subjectivity. This may be a little difficult for us to understand today because other media like TV or cinema have supplanted the primacy of the novel specifically and of the print culture in general as the carriers of collective consciousness. But if we go back to the mid and late nineteenth century, the novel in India had played a role similar to what serials like Ramayan, Mahabharat or *Buniyad* played in the last decades of the twentieth century in India.

The other thing to remember about the novel in India was that it was by no means the product of the subaltern classes. We may recall Ranajit Guha's definition of the subalterns as those who do not belong to elite groups. Further, he defines three kinds of elite groups not belonging to any of which marks the 'identity as difference' of the subalterns. These three elites are: dominant foreign groups, dominant indigenous groups at the all-India level and dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels. The rest of the people or the subalterns are defined by Guha as representing 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "elite"' (*Subaltern Studies* I). From such a definition it would be clear that the early novelists of India belonged either to national or regional elites and were therefore not subalterns at all, except in so far as we may wish to complicate Guha's definition by turning it relational, instead of essential. I think what I have said, with some qualifications, applies to the novelists of today as well. Whether belonging to Dalits or women or other minority groups, these novelists cannot be described as subalterns except in relation to more privileged groups than themselves. This distinction needs to be borne in mind if we want to opt for a politics of the possible instead of a politics of the popular. In my own book *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, was used the word 'sub-imperial' to characterize the Indian English novel.

Now, the various dominant classes who were the writers and readers of early Indian novels were, of course, also the founders of Indian nationalism. We cannot think of a better example of this combination than Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who was a pioneer of not only modern Bengali prose, but also of modern Hindu consciousness. He was not only among the first graduates of Calcutta University, but also an important member of the British civil service that ruled India. Thus, modern Hindu consciousness was itself constructed out of usable and reinvigorated elements from the past, from traditions which stretched back to thousands of years, combined with elements borrowed, absorbed and assimilated from the West. The Indian novel itself was a specific example of such a creative and hybrid fusion. What is perhaps more important is that this modern Hindu consciousness that emerged in the nineteenth century or thereabouts also had a critical element in it which allowed change, reform and progress.

This does not imply that modern India is the product of modern Hindu consciousness and that the Indian novel is therefore the same as the Hindu novel. While modern Hindu consciousness had a crucial role to play in the formation of modern India, I would not go to the extent of claiming that it was the only component or even the dominant one. The fact is that modern Hindu consciousness and modern Indian national consciousness are both by definition anti-sectarian, anti-regional, and therefore tend to cosmopolitanism or universalism. In other words, the *Sanatana* tradition is inherently incompatible with a theocratic state or theological exclusivism. This, I believe, is what prompted Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders to insist on a state which if not secular in the Western sense was nonetheless not captive to any one religious group or denomination.

I have dwelt so long on the nature of Indian modernity and on its relationship with modern Hindu consciousness because they are crucial to any project that tries to situate the Indian novel. In *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel,* my modest effort in trying to understand this phenomenon, I tried to situate the Indian novel by placing it in the grids of ideology, politics, caste, cross-cultural representation and, most crucially, in traditions of Indian narratology. Those arguments need not be repeated, but the scope of that framework could be extended. In the earlier book, there was, however, one grid that I did not employ, except tangentially – this was the grid of language, the status of the English novel vis-à-vis its (distant) country cousins.

I would like to do so briefly, before returning to the earlier concerns. In another paper, which was also originally the keynote address at a conference on the Indian English novel, I argued that the Indian English, that is not just the language, but its entire range of literary and cultural production, as argued

earlier, needs to be juxtaposed with its con/texts to be understood properly.[3] By con/texts I do not only mean the overall social, economic and cultural backgrounds and the grounds of production, which is of course the normal meaning of the word. These con/texts, I might add, need much greater elaboration in our classrooms than we are wont to give them. But for this to happen we need not only political, but social and cultural histories of our times, an activity that we have lagged behind in. If the con/texts of this literature were really to be studied and understood, they would quite naturally lead to the other sense in which I use this word today. One aspect of the broader con/texts of Indian English literature is its linguistic placement and location. Here, we are led immediately to the multilingual con/texts of this literature, which are at odds, so to speak, with its monolingual representational medium. I shall turn to this problem later, but by hinting at it here I wish also to hint at the special sense in which I use the word con/texts.

By con/texts I mean a whole range and group of texts which serve as contrary points of reference. These texts, then are the con- or contrary or opposing texts, in conjunction with which this literature needs to be read and understood. This is the manner in which the word 'context' has been used in an important book by my friend, John Thieme. As you may have guessed by now, what I am suggesting is that Indian English literature can best be read in conjunction with these counter-texts. These con- or counter-texts that I keep referring are the vernacular literatures of India, in which are contained the con- or contrary portrayals of India in juxtaposition to which Indian English literature is best understood. In other words, my argument, which is by no means either new or especially novel, holds that the literature of India is complex not only because it is multilingual and multicultural, but because as a cultural system it cannot be contained in one single language. In other words, India, 'Indianess' and Indian literature are not arithmetical and cumulative, the sum total of the literatures in various languages, but something slightly different altogether. That is, the total, in this case is more than a sum of the parts. In a peculiar sense, it is also less than a sum of the parts because every once in a while we may encounter a text which aims at expressing nothing short of the totality of India, even if it is in only one of its multitudinous languages. So, Indian literature and by extension, India and 'Indianness', belong to a different dimension than the mere accumulation of texts and tongues.

This is somewhat akin to how a translated text is neither the original nor an entirely new text, but a different kind of text, a trans-text, if you will. Translation is, of course, central to my argument and I shall come to it soon. But analogically, let me suggest here that Indian literature is, thus, not just a literature but a

[3] 'Indian Anglophony, Diasporan Polycentricism and Postcolonial Futures.'

trans-literature. That is why it is all the more pernicious for Indian English literature to usurp the entire or the overwhelmingly significant part of space given to it, as is increasingly the case. Not only is Indian English literature not the entirety of Indian literature, but any special claims that it might make either in terms of quality or quantity must be rigorously questioned. This is not to doubt either the validity or the raison d'être of Indian English literature, but to seek to reposition it in the continuum of Indian literatures.

I am thus making a case against any claims to autonomy and self-sufficiency that Indian English literature or its advocates might advance. To speak of a tradition of Indian English literature, then, is at best fraught with major problems. To teach this literature in and of itself, as is done in the universities all over India and the world, is even less sustainable. Being a hybrid literature, Indian English demands a dual set of parameters, both national and international. There is, on the one hand, an international tradition of writing in English, called by any name, of which Indian English literature partakes, but it is also a part of the trans-tradition called Indian literature. So far as its study vis-à-vis India is concerned, it is best studied along with its con/texts, i.e. the vernacular literatures of India.

The cultural wars between Indian English and vernacular writers, as indeed the cultural wars between internationalist and nativist writers, Dalit and non-Dalit writers and critics, and between other such contending groups, are really power struggles between contending elites, not between elite and subaltern groups. In other words, the Indian novel, whether in English or the *bhashas*, is, and is likely to remain a bourgeois product, written by elites or aspiring elites, either of the international, national, regional or local variety. This is how we might situate its class origins and class consciousness. Its caste, I have already argued in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* is a westernizing, de-brahminised group made up, paradoxically, mostly of members of the Brahmin and other Savarna groups. This, however, is gradually changing. There is an interesting sociological study that is called for here. The traditional upper castes are vacating the *bhashas* in favour of English. So the *bhashas*, which were Sanskritised and Brahminised in the nineteenth century, are now facing a flight from these hegemonic groups, and are consequently in the process of a concerted and serious re-democraticization and vernacularization. Indian English, on the other hand, remains the preserve of two kinds of elites – upper caste Hindu, on the one hand, and of religious minorities like Parsis, Jews, Christians, Sikh and Muslim Indians on the other. The pan-Indian and non-regional character of Indian English easily lends itself to the self-representation and self-assertion of such groups.

Here is where the link to translation comes in. Translation is carrying over, bearing or taking across (*translatus* is a past participle of *transferre*, which means

to ferry across). Only in translation is it possible to retain the self as one addresses the other. It is possible to have both repulsion and desire at the same time. Such is the desire that operates the complicated relationship between English and the *bhashas*. I would argue that the goal of vernacularization is best achieved through translation. This is a dual and dialectical process that involves the vernacularization of English on the one hand, that is the use of English in the service of the *bahujan samaj*, not against it in an exclusionary manner. In other words, English can be legitimated only as one of the vernaculars of India, not as the language of the colonial masters and their descendants, the native bourgeois. The other side is for the vernaculars to become available in English, through translation. My contention is that the rhetoric of vernacular India, as articulated by very few of the texts in English and by several texts translated from the vernaculars into English is very different from the rhetoric of English India, a topic on which I spoke at length at the United States Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (USACLALS), 2002.

I will now return to the more contentious and complicated issue of the nature of consciousness that the Indian novel embodies and expresses. Without addressing this question, I cannot see how we can succeed in our mandate of situating the Indian novel. It seems to me that the politics, philosophy, psychology, and the sociology of the novel, why even the economics of the novel to which the Marxists ought to allude to, depends on this fundamental question. In fact, I propose that in all forms of analysis and argumentation in the human sciences, there are some primary postulates. To me, the primary postulate is some kind of national or civilizational category of understanding. In other words, the primary postulate is not class, caste, religion, ideology or even aesthetics – though the novel is of course an aesthetic object. Those who seek to situate the Indian novel only or even primarily in any one of these categories will, in my opinion, arrive only at a partial and flawed understanding.

The best category for the analysis of the Indian novel, the best way of situating it is in my opinion, as the expression of a national consciousness. From such a standpoint we might raise, once again, those questions about the nature and character of the Indian novel which are involved in any attempt to situate it. What is the Indian novel? How is it defined? What function does it serve? How is it best understood? Again, on the basis of the preceding arguments, we may answer these questions in the following matter. The Indian novel is a work of art which expresses the consciousness of an emerging Indian collectivity. Its themes, characters, plots and styles are all linked to this Indian collectivity. If you do not like the word nation, you could use some other word for it like *praja* or people or community.

Sudhir Kumar, who has done a lot of work on this aspect of the Indian novel, says:

> The issue of narrating the nation is invariably linked with its people, their lives, beliefs inter/intra communal relationships and issues of culture and politics. […] Hence the need and significance of locating a text within the sociocultural discourses operative in the nation. […] Reconstruction of the nation is also the reconstruction of shared meanings which the text carries either as subtext or traces (177).

That is why I agree with Sudhir, that though the novel's authors and readers are bourgeois, its concerns are with the larger Indian collectivity.

But this only begs the question of how we might define or situate this larger collectivity. What sort of nation is this? What sort of people are we, its citizens? What is its project, its endeavour? These questions have no simple answers; hence, again, I would advocate an *anekantavada*. But, here, let me present my own approach to these questions. It stands to reason that we are a certain kind of people, defined by certain values, certain basic principles, certain ways of living. These values, principles, and ways of living have evolved over thousands of years, but are nonetheless the elaboration of certain foundational ideas. Without trying to define them here, I can only suggest, as have several inspiring figures in recent times, that the Indian nation, the Indian collectivity, the Indian people are deeply wedded to a way of life which might be called Dharmic. In other words, we are all people who belong to a Dharma-based view of the world. This Dharma is not to be confused with any particular religion or group, but with a civilizational outlook that a number most of people in India, whether Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Sikhs or Muslims, can partake and share. If I wanted to be a little more precise, I would say that we are *Sanatani* (perennial) people, which is the same as saying we are *Akali* (transcending time) people, who are also trying simultaneously to be a part of the modern world and the citizens of a modern nation.

Let us remember that the modern Indian nation is not based on the Millat system of Turkey in which, though many groups and collectives were recognized, one group, one nation, usually a religious group, dominated over all others. On the contrary, the Republic of India is based on the view that all the people living within its boundaries are citizens, and hence equals by definition. Now this modern notion of citizen militates against all kinds of traditional notions of hierarchy and privilege on the one hand, and also with modern notions of the rule of the majority and of state hegemony. So the real challenge for all dominant groups within India, whether these are Hindus in general or Sikhs in Punjab, Muslims in Kashmir or Christians in the North East, and so on, is

how to mediate between the privileges of numerical superiority and their responsibilities towards other citizens. In a peculiar paradox we find that those minorities that clamour for justice, where they have a majority, often treat other minorities very badly – a case in point is how the Muslim majority in Kashmir has treated the Hindu minority.

If the Indian novel embodies or expresses a national consciousness, then this consciousness is uniquely one that has tried to mediate between certain deep seated civilizational values in conjunction with the imperatives of a modern nation state. It would appear that the aesthetics of the Indian novel are also tied up with such a self-identity. After all, aesthetics in our tradition is never divorced from ethics. As Kapil Kapoor has shown in 'Theory of the Novel: The Indian View', narratives in Indian traditions were always considered to constitute 'an independent epistemology' and 'also function as an elaboration or illustration of abstract knowledge' (80). Therefore, the Indian novel cannot be seen as a purely aesthetic product in the Western sense, nor a pure commodity in the contemporary capitalist sense, but a work that reflects and interrogates the larger civilizational and national enterprise of the community in which it is produced. The Mahabharata, for instance, proclaims that 'With the Itihasa and Purana alone, the meaning of the Vedas can be expounded and their validity understood' (Vol. I, 267–8). Likewise, the *Natyasastra* declares that *natya*, and by extension, all forms of narrative arts, is the fifth *Veda*. It conveys or is meant to convey, knowledge of the cardinal ends of life, the *purusharthas*. The novel in this view is above all an epistemological entity which gives us *vidya* or knowledge. This does not mean that it is merely didactic or that its aesthetics is subordinate to its didactic properties. Please note that the *Natyasastra* does not sacrifice the aesthetic at the altar of Platonic moralism nor offer it a secondary sort of social utility via an Aristotelean catharsis, but ensures the autonomy and the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic by imbuing it with the same grandeur as the spiritual.

*Natya*, like *yagna*, is a *kriya*, an action, which is as powerful as it is good, as pleasing as it is instructive, as full of possibilities and values as life itself. In other words, in our traditions, the aesthetic is the moral. As I suggest in my essay on the topic (see Works Cited), *rasa* is not sentiment or art or emotion or even taste, but *rasa* is understanding, knowledge and discernment of the truth of experience, just as *bhava* is not feeling or emotion, or sensation, but a state of being. *Rasa*, then, is a cognitive category that yields knowledge of experience or states of being. In other words, the experience of *rasa* is tied to the *purusharthas* and teaches us how to live, how to conduct ourselves, how, in a word, to be humans, citizens, men, women, sons, daughter, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and so on. What such a civilizational framework gives us, ultimately, is

the possibility of the aesthetic – serving the larger ends of life as completely as any other aspect of life – whether political, social, economic, scientific, and so on – can. The aesthetic is neither subordinate nor supraordinate to other forms of human activity and expression, but cognate and conjoint with them.

To sum up the Indian novel, unlike the Western novel, is expressive not of individualism but of a collectivity. As such, the Indian novel is best understood in its wider context of literary creativity in all Indian languages. Though written by various elite groups, the Indian novel is actually concerned with the experience and expression of this Indian collectivity. This collectivity may be defined as the modern Indian nation, which itself is a combination of usable elements from its past and critical elements of Western modernity. Since this collectivity is both the manifestation and the instrument of an ongoing civilizational enterprise, the novel also bears the self-representations and self-apprehensions of this civilizational enterprise. Taken together, the works that constitute this collectivity, regardless of their class, caste, gender and other markers, are really parts of a wider and deeper narrative of the Indian consciousness. This consciousness has been from the very ancient times concerned with Dharma or the right way of living on earth. Since Indian narrative traditions have never separated aesthetics from ethics but have seen the former as conducive to the latter, the Indian novel needs to be situated in such a framework to best understand and appreciate it. The Indian novel, then, is best defined as a pleasure-knowledge construct situated in the collectivity called the Indian nation/civilization and its function is to interrogate even as it intervenes in the lives of the people who form this collectivity.

# 2

# CONVERSATIONS IN BLOOMSBURY: T S Eliot through Indian Eyes

## T S Eliot and India

For many years, T S Eliot was India's favourite Anglo–American writer next only to Shakespeare. After the great Bard, more criticism and PhD dissertations are on him in India than on any other author in English literature. It is equally true that this presence has also waned considerably, if not vanished altogether in the last twenty years. If Eliot's popularity and influence on Indians has been enormous and his eclipse equally sudden, the logical question is why? Doubtless, such questions do not have simple answers and perhaps are unanswerable, but I am sure that each Eliot scholar has his or her own answer to them.

My hypothesis is that Indians love Eliot for two somewhat contradictory reasons. First, Eliot became for them an emancipatory and empowering agent of change. He brought home to them the fruits of Western modernism and they used his influence to liberate themselves from what they saw as older, more oppressive modes of literature and critical discourse. Let me illustrate with a few randomly chosen effusions from P Lal's *shraddhanjali*, *T. S. Eliot: Homage from India*. I will start with Lal himself:

> Noble father of the new style,
> May your syllables of sensuous intelligence
> Guide our faring forward (14)

The lines illustrate precisely those liberating and empowering aspects that I mentioned above. It is as the father of the new style that the poet can guide us forward, according to Lal. If Lal the poet acknowledges Eliot's modernism, Lal the critic also pays tribute to Eliot's attempts to combine thought and feeling in a fashion that Eliot himself claimed was lost to English poetry after the Metaphysical poets. Though modernism via Eliot

is being welcomed, the worshipful attitude of the receiver is somewhat premodern, certainly unwestern.

Amaresh Datta, a Professor of English and a minor Indian English poet, spells out the power of Eliot's poetic technique which Lal hailed earlier:

> He had, it seemed to me, discovered the most authentic and therefore the most expressive poetic idiom of our age and after Eliot it was not possible to write in any other idiom without striking a false note [...] His influence has indeed gone so deep that one may echo his thoughts and sentiments or repeat his images and phrases without even being aware of it, for they have become almost a part of one's poetic paraphernalia (112).

Striking a slightly different note, Amalendu Das Gupta stresses the appeal of the new modernist sensibility embodied in Eliot's work:

> The mood of disillusionment and the sense of futility which Eliot's early work represented found a quick emotional response in India. Although the objective setting was different, Indian young men found in it, as it were, a record of their own social and political frustration, of their own mood of vague meaninglessness. This mood was partly the result of temperament, partly the consequence of long political subjection, lack of adequate opportunities, social and economic distress, a fatal absence of any serious responsibility and a wrong system of education. The old idols had been shattered, while the new gospels were confusing (170–1).

Both quotations suggest that the modernist sensibility of Eliot's early poems found a responsive chord in the Indian psyche. And hence the popularity of Eliot.

I go along with this interpretation to a certain extent. At least in Indian English poetry, with which I am somewhat familiar, modernism does bring with it freedom of expression, scepticism, irony, experimentation with form, preoccupation with the urban landscape, primacy of the image as the vehicle of poetic thought, candidness in themes, introspection, quest for identity in a hostile world and a break with the past. Thus, in this first phase of influence, Eliot became for us the embodiment of a new aesthetic, a figure to worship and emulate.

But as Das Gupta says above, such an influence is a matter of moods. And moods pass away, even if whole generations share them. How then do we account for the enduring popularity of Eliot? This brings me to the second part of my speculation. I believe that India accepts Eliot because he becomes the West's other, functioning as a minority voice swamped by the secular and

materialistic culture that represents for us the usual face of the West as oppressor and predator. I think it is the religious Eliot that contributes to this notion of him in India and finds an enduring resonance here.

The interpretation that I have presented above has built into it quite a few paradoxes. In his beliefs Eliot was actually a political conservative who seldom criticized British imperialism openly. This did not matter so much to us, though, because we did not seek in him a political ally. I think we consider Eliot our own because he made it his life long agenda to question and then reorder the priorities of the West. To this end he sought succour in the springs of the sacred and mystical traditions of the West itself, which he tried to uncover beneath the materialistic and secular debris of a post-renaissance Western civilization. But in this project, he also secured help from the now all too familiar elements of Eastern spirituality. At least superficially, the first footholds which Indians get into Eliot studies are via *Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Shantih* and what Krishna meant. The Indian sources of Eliot's thought, even on deeper study, yield rich results as is evident in Cleo McNelly Kearns' study, *T S Eliot and Indic Traditions* (1987). Through these means, we are able to get to the deeper springs of Eliot's inspiration that show leanings and desires which are quite subversive so far as modern Western civilization is concerned. Thus, it is possible to see in Eliot the resurgence of the West's suppressed longing for a human society ordered by a higher moral and spiritual authority, something that we can readily relate to. After all, nothing can be more appealing, at least subconsciously, to Indians who find themselves materially impoverished and backward, than the idea that the spiritual is, after all, higher than the material. We cannot help admiring Eliot for attacking precisely those aspects of Western civilization which are so threatening to us – its material power and glory.

What, then, accounts for the decline of India's interest in Eliot? The answer, to my mind, is the rise of 'theory' and the 'post', which swept through Indian academics in the 1980s and made writers like Eliot, Yeats, Graham Greene and D H Lawrence, so popular earlier, somewhat unfashionable. Instead of canonical literature, writing from the margins became much more fashionable. Post-colonial writers from the outposts of the empire entered university syllabi. So while the more capable and committed postgraduates took to theory, the ones who wished for 'easier' topics preferred Canadian, Australian, African and Indian English authors.

## T S Eliot and Mulk Raj Anand

This chapter is only peripherally about the reception of Eliot in India. My main focus is actually Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal of Eliot in *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981). This book is an extraordinary document which details Anand's literary encounters with some of the leading English writers, artists

and intellectuals during the early 1920s. Those featured in Anand's reminiscences include E M Forster, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, Bonamy Dobree, Arthur Waley, Beryl de Zoete, John Maynard Keynes, Laurence Binyon, D H Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, John Middleton Murry, Edith Sitwell, Herbert Read – and of course, T S Eliot. Anand has used this material in several places including his novel *The Bubble* (1984), which is a part of his huge autobiographical novel series, *The Seven Ages of Man.* What is not used in *The Bubble*, and this includes the Eliot material, finds itself in *Conversations in Bloomsbury.*

Before I begin to analyse the content of those portions which deal with Eliot, let me make two or three points about why I consider Anand's account of his meetings with Eliot so significant. First of all, I find that Indian or Western critics have not considered it. If there is a legitimate space in critical discourse for such personal reminiscences, then we have missed an important source. Indeed, a good deal of knowledge about Eliot comes from similar accounts published by his admirers and disciples in the West; Eliot's biographers certainly have taken this seriously and put it to good use. Let me mention only two such collections of memories and reminiscences of the poet which have been very influential. The first called *T.S.Eliot* was compiled by Richard March and Tambimuttu and published as early as 1949. In his 'Foreword' March writes:

> It has been our aim to present a picture of T S Eliot, the man in the particular settings in which he has been active as poet and man of letters [...] Pure criticism has been kept down to a minimum since this predominates among the vast mass of writing that has already appeared about Mr. Eliot. It was felt that a more useful and unusual book would result, if we asked for reminiscences from those who were intimately associated with Mr. Eliot at various times, and for personal statements describing the writer's first reaction to his poetry, or the manner in which they became acquainted with it or were influenced by it (12).

This collection contains reminiscences by Clive Bell, Conrad Eiken, Wyndham Lewis, Edith Sitwell, William Empson, James Reeves, W H Auden and Desmond Hawkins, among others. It also contains two interesting pieces by Indians – Bishnu Dey's 'Mr. Eliot among the Arjunas' (96–102) and Amalendu Bose's 'T.S. Eliot and Bengali Poetry' (225–30). That the March and Tambimuttu volume is universally read by Eliot aficionados and scholars is no surprise. It is cited in all bibliographies and biographies of Eliot and some of its pieces are reproduced in the standard collections of critical essays on Eliot. Another noteworthy collection of reminiscences can be found in Allen Tate's *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His*

*Work* (1967). This contains accounts by I A Richards, Herbert Read, Stephen Spender, Bonamy Dobree and others.

If we acknowledge the importance of such reminiscences in Eliot studies, we must similarly appreciate or examine Anand's *Conversations.* This brings me to my second point – as far as I know, nobody else has done so. Because Anand's book was published in 1981, after the publication of Gallop's or Martin's bibliographies, one does not expect to find his work cited in them. But it is cited neither in Beatrice Ricks' *T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography of Secondary Works* (1982) or, what is more surprising, in Ramaiah's *Indian Responses to T. S. Eliot* (1988). It would, of course, be too naive to expect the biographies of Eliot that have appeared after 1981 (such as those of Peter Ackroyd or Lyndall Gordon) to make anything out of Anand's book: most of us, Indian authors of books published in India have learned to accept the indifference and silence with which the West passes over our endeavours. However, there is a silver lining to this neglect; it allows an academic such as me to crow over my discovery and cadge a paper out of this ostensibly obscure source. Finally, Anand himself was a major writer, one of the founders of the modern Indian English novel. The author of *Untouchable* (1935) and more than fifteen other novels and hundred books in all, he died in 2004 just before he reached the age of ninety-nine. Anand's text, thus, is valuable not only for what it tells us about Eliot or the other writers he met, but about himself and the Indo–British encounter just before independence.

But let me, without further ado, come to Anand's encounter with Eliot in *Conversations in Bloomsbury.* The portions that concern Eliot are 'Lions and Shadows in the Sherry Party in Harold Monroe's Poetry Bookshop' (17–30), 'How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot: A Talk in the Etiole with T.S. Eliot and Bonamy Dobree' (43–52), 'White Gods and Dark Gods – A Talk with T.S. Eliot in the *Criterion* Office' (118–24), 'Paradox or Order – A Talk with T.S. Eliot in the *Criterion* Office' (129–32)and 'Reason and Romanticism – A Talk with T.S. Eliot in Schmidt's Restaurant in Charlotte Street'(144–51).

Thus, we see a sizeable material for analysis in the book. But before I begin, I want to make two related points that I shall illustrate and return to later. The first is that Anand's *Conversations* is, obviously, not on Eliot alone; hence, the kind of reading that I am about to make of his encounters with Eliot is also possible to do with other distinguished authors like Virginia Woolf or D H Lawrence. However, what is important is that even here, of the major authors that Anand encounters, it is Eliot who receives the maximum attention. This not only ties in with what I said earlier about the dominating influence of Eliot on Indians, but also anticipates my second point. Anand is fascinated by Eliot because he finds in him the key to an understanding of the state of the art of Western poetry and culture. Anand's project, thus, becomes one to capture

the West through Eliot – that is, to define, understand, absorb, appropriate, and thus tame, domesticate or neutralize what might otherwise have been a threatening and dominating influence. This is a classic instance, in practice, of an aspiring writer Anand, trying to ward off the anxiety of influence exerted by a strong poet, Eliot, by deliberately misreading, reducing, defining the threatening master and rival.[1] I want to stress that Anand's reminiscences are, in this sense, different from those of Western poets like Spender or Empson. The latter may consider themselves the children of Eliot or, at any rate, his heirs and descendants; even if they quarrel with him, it is a domestic quarrel. But Anand as an Indian is doubly marginal: not only is he lower than Eliot in the poetic/literary hierarchy, but he is also racially, culturally and socially inferior. His task is thus harder. Though the openness and benevolence of the patriarchal Western poet softens the clash, the intensity of the struggle of the marginalized and disadvantaged Indian writer in the metropolis is in no way less severe. Colonial Europe's bastard offspring, the cultural mulattoes, were no doubt allowed into its parlours in the liberal twenties, but that did not make their shame, rage and thirst for recognition less acute or traumatic.

Very early on in the book, Anand's persona is established as that of a painfully self-conscious, precocious, awkward, Punjabi (or 'uncouth', as Anand himself implies on page 44), callow, and aspiring, Indian writer. Indian is important in the sense that it implies not only non-English, colonized, brown-skinned, exotic, but definitely the outsider, the exiled, the expatriate. Anand finds that the most liberal and affable British intellectuals, who can be very friendly personally, believe in Pax Britannica and dislike Gandhi. This list includes not only Kipling, then at the height of his celebrity, but Anand's own mentor Bonamy Dobree, and Eliot (15). So, with his precocity and native wit, Anand finds himself in the midst of some of the greatest writers in England at the sherry party in Harold Monroe's poetry bookshop (Ch II). Anand is introduced to Eliot as 'a fresh arrival' by Dobree:

> I bowed shyly and muttered: 'Good Evening, Sir'. And, sweating, confused, small against his tall presence, I stood there, head bent, emptied of all thought... (19).

This opening passage, I believe is of extraordinary significance. This marks the lowest point from which Anand's project at self-empowerment proceeds. We can later measure Anand's progress by comparing him with his state at the beginning of the encounter. Here, Anand is completely penetrated by the

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[1] See Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence : A Theory of Poetry* (1973) which provides the basic theoretical framework for this chapter.

dominance of the metropolis whose representative Eliot is. The image is clearly Freudian: Anand has become a child in awe of his 'father', his rival, with his all-powerful and massive phallus (read 'pen' in this context), who looms so large over him. I would like to suggest that this is precisely the condition of the average Indian student when confronted with one of the major Western authors. This is the experience of the colonial subject being totally subordinated by the all-powerful presence of the Western author writing in an alien tongue. Anand uses the word 'empty'; the subject is reduced to a cipher a total non-entity in the face of such superior might. I would argue that the Indian student of English literature instantly identifies with Anand's discomfiture. Anand's entire project becomes doubly meaningful, not simply as a personal encounter between a major Indian writer and the greatest English poet of his time, but as a political act, the struggle between two cultures, between the colonized and the colonizer.

Of course, the subject is not totally helpless; he does have some tools with which to enter into the lists. In this case, Anand's 'secret weapon' is Mohammad Iqbal. But we realize soon that Iqbal is merely a ruse, Anand's real purpose is even more subversive. In comparing Eliot with Iqbal, he wants to contrast the minds of two great poets – how an Eastern poet, Iqbal, creatively used the West for inspiration and how a Western poet, Eliot, used Indian sources.

> I felt that, beyond Iqbal, I wanted to understand the thoughts which he had imbibed in Europe. I hoped T.S. Eliot would reveal his innermost mind. I wanted to immediately ask him about the myths from India he had referred to in his poem, *The Waste Land* (19).

What Anand really desires is the reverse of what Said meant by Orientalism; here the Oriental wants to penetrate the 'inner-most mind' of Europe. Here Europe is the Other, waiting to be demystified by the inquisitive Oriental because Anand's wish to understand Europe is no less than his wanting to control it. Note also that Anand's foothold into *The Waste Land* (1922) is Eliot's use of Indian myths, the point that I made earlier.

However, Anand's project receives a temporary setback when his 'secret weapon' Iqbal, fails to do its job:

> But from the reserved, tight-lipped, urbane presence came only an implied condemnation of Iqbal in a brief sentence: 'Not the same depth in Islam as in Hindu and Buddhist thought.' (19)

Here we see a key tendency in Eliot as constructed by Anand which will be reinforced through several instances later, the tendency to make categorical and sweeping judgements. Indeed, Eliot goes on to assert that the Muslims

'took much from the Jews – and Mohamet owed a good deal to the Christian revelation' (20). In this case, there are at least two ways of interpreting Eliot's remark: one can either consider it a typical example of Orientalist pathology or the germ of a profound truth. Eliot lovers and Islamic scholars, too, will no doubt differ on this one.

As will be fairly obvious, this very first 'encounter' throws up some interesting methodological questions. Should we 'accept' at face value what Anand records as 'reliable'? Indeed, one could question the authenticity of the entire book, insinuating that much of it is invented by Anand, who is of course a novelist. But I believe that even if there is some embellishment here and there, the conversations overall seem authentic. Anand tells us in his Preface that they are based on the copious notes that he took about his life in London in the twenties as a part of his agenda to become a writer. He admits to having modified them for publication, 'I then recorded some of my talks with these writers which I have since revised' (5). We, therefore, have no reason to disbelieve Anand or to consider his record unreliable. Or, at any rate, it deserves as much credence as accounts by English and American intellectuals who knew Eliot and wrote their reminiscences of him. But, to consider the extreme contrafactual case, what if they were largely fictional? Even so, they cannot be robbed of their textuality; the conversations, at the very least, are like any other literary text, which demands to be read, interpreted and enjoyed irrespective of its ultimate truth-value.

A more serious objection can be that I myself accept Anand's version of Eliot almost uncritically, with the result that Eliot does not really have a fair chance. First, Anand misrepresents Eliot to render him a sort of conservative and arrogant imperialist; secondly, I myself interpret this misrepresentation as a part of my own larger anti-colonial agenda. If Anand's preoccupations with his own identity made him read Eliot in a certain way, doubtless, my own preoccupations will cause me to read Anand's interpretation of Eliot to suit my own purposes. I do not know how we can escape our subjective positions, much better to own them up rather than hiding them. In my own case, there is the distinct possibility of enjoying, in a more relaxed fashion, what is so much like a game, two great writers struggling against one another rather, or at any rate, a young Indian writer striving to find his own voice and footing in metropolitan London through his face-off with arguably the greatest living poet of the English language. Without taking sides in the fray, I am conscious of my own post-colonial identification with and sympathies for Anand. After all, as an Indian student of English and a writer, I too share his sense of being threatened and overshadowed by a strong poet. So, even ninety years after Anand, the power equations between us and them are not altogether altered. Like Anand, I too find myself fraught by the pressure to publish internationally,

to compete for recognition and citations. Yet, I hope that this similarity does not cloud critical acumen and impartiality altogether. After all, the very process of criticism implies the negative capability that allows us to go beyond our immediate interests or subject positions.

To return to Anand's first meeting with Eliot, we find that the conversation flows freely, with the sherry. Dobree and Nikhil Sen, a leftist émigré, also join in. Anand's ploy to defend Islamic mysticism or Iqbal does not succeed. The only thing that Eliot finds interesting about Iqbal, it would appear, is that he is from Lahore, a city in which Kipling lived and worked. Here again we see a mock battle between the colonizers and the colonized: Anand and Sen do not see much in *Kim* (1901) or Kipling. Anand calls the novel, 'a fairy tale glorifying a young boy [...] A little hero of the Empire – a fantasy boy [...]' while Sen cynically chimes in, 'And superior to all the Indians put together' (21). Eliot, of course, admires Kipling, at least his art. From Sen's jab about imperialism, the conversation turns to Gandhi. Eliot is not comfortable with Gandhi at all: 'Gandhi seems to be an anarchist [...] Sometimes, I feel the Indians should pursue their culture and leave government to the British empiricists [...]' Another all too familiar pearl of wisdom: Indians are good for culture, spirituality, and such things as are other-worldly; the British are empiricists, realists, so they must rule – a sort of natural explanation and justification for empire. Before this part of the conversation ends, Eliot (mis)pronounces Mohammad as 'Mahomet'; Anand's response speaks for itself: 'My pride had made me rigid. I wanted to correct Mr Eliot for mispronouncing Mohammad. The thwartings [sic] which had made me a rebel at home throbbed behind my head'. Instead, Anand does something less radical and more reasonable: 'I moved towards the sherry tray', he says, 'surprised that two of the most self-conscious writers should be so removed from the actualities in India' (22).

The next interesting nugget in this chapter concerns the meeting between Lawrence and Eliot. Interestingly, Lawrence also appears to be as ill-informed, if less passionately so, about India. In contrast, it is Aldous Huxley, also present at the party, who emerges as the most knowledgeable and open-minded (23). But for Lawrence aficionados, the meeting between him and Eliot will be of interest: 'The two lions feigned humility, bowed and shook hands'. It is, obviously, a strained meeting. The two great writers do not get along well (see 50 and 131 for more).

The next encounter with Eliot is in Chapter 5 entitled, 'How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot: A Talk in the Etoile with T. S. Eliot and Bonamy Dobree'. Anand tells us that Dobree dined with Eliot once a month, as was customary among the Bloomsbury intellectuals (43). The Etoile was a fancy French restaurant such as Anand could not afford to go to on his own. This makes him all the more nervous. Eliot comes in dressed nattily, 'looking like a

businessman, with a pearl pin on his check necktie heightening a black, near parson's suit, with a grey felt hat on his head, an umbrella in his right hand' (43). He is taciturn: 'He kept a stiff upper lip raised, even when he greeted Dobree with a "Hello"' (44). Anand starts the conversation with a gauche opening, 'I shall now be able to understand *The Waste Land*' (44), reminding us of his counter-Orientalist project again.

Without describing the conversation in detail, I would like to highlight those of Eliot's words that I consider important. First, to Anand's remark that 'Shankara called the body a bagful of dirt', Eliot's reply is, 'Indeed, that is what it probably is, his face contracting as he turned to the menu' (45). After this the conversation proceeds desultorily, Eliot coming down against anarchy and Gandhi 'If Herbert will talk anarchy, Wyndham Lewis is bound to attack him!' (45), and 'Look at your people running riot in spite of Gandhi's talk of non-violence' (46). He also declares his preference for male company at lunch. 'I prefer a stag lunch party – in the evening one can dress for dinner and meet the ladies' (46). Commenting on the state of the (Western) world, he goes on to assert rather gloomily, 'Clearly [...] We are already in doomsday' (47). About Buddha, he says, 'he lacked a center of gravity' (49). To Dobree's remark, 'I suspect, Tom, you use sexual impotence as a symbol for the malady of contemporary life', Eliot nods and says, 'I think people are bored, without belief' (50). Then, again, a glimpse of Eliot the imperialist 'I do not agree with defiance of law. The British have done much good in India' (52). The conversation ends with Eliot's inviting Anand to meet him at Faber and Faber because he (Eliot) thinks Anand can do some notes on Oriental subjects for his *Criterion* (52).

The image of Eliot that emerges in this conversation is that of a conservative, taciturn man, who hides some deep sorrow inside. We can see Eliot as a repressed person who has strong beliefs: one of them is certainly the legitimacy of law and order, both literary and social, quite in contrast with what one might expect from the author of *The Waste Land*. However, it appears that the lack of conventional form in the poem does not imply an act of rebellion so much as highlight a deeper longing for an order that is no longer available. Finally, I would say that Eliot shows a total lack of awareness of larger political and economic considerations, especially of how the British Empire works in oppressing and exploiting its subjects.

Anand gives us his own commentary on Eliot during the conversation, which I think I should quote at greater length.

> In Eliot's solemnity, I could sense his disenchantment with life and obsession with death, discord and decay. I had heard that his wife was not well, that he was not happy with her, and that he was really not

> accepted by the British intellectuals like J. C. Squire, J. B. Priestly, and even Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster and Clive Bell of the inner-circle of the Bloomsbury group. They probably still had, in spite of the industrial revolution, a nostalgia for the 'Merry Old England,' of the days of beef-eating, drinking beer and dancing around the Maypole. In fact, I could see strains of Paganism among most of the English, underneath the long lined faces of the 'melancholy gentlemen,' as I called them behind their backs and sometimes in front of them. And when they were not lusty, they were skeptical in the tradition of Hume, extended by Bertrand Russell, and the commonsense Realists. Eliot had ushered in a time of sorrow. He was almost like Jeremiah when he had written in *The Waste Land*:
>
> That corpse you planted last year in your garden
> Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (48)

Eliot's melancholy, his unhappy marriage, asceticism, and sense of guilt and alienation, have been noted by most of his biographers. Anand's remarks serve as a useful corroboration. Anand notices, for instance, that Eliot is not interested in the 'marvellous' food that has been placed before him (49). He sees Eliot as a person very suspicious of the instinctual, the ecstatic, and the passionate, quite the opposite of Lawrence in his attitudes:

> I felt there was no way for anyone to suggest to the divided self of Eliot that millions of people survived through sheer instinct. And that beyond the worries of western poets, there were moments of ecstasy as in the dances of the Beas Guru where my uncle was swaying away like a Sufi Dervish (50).

It is interesting to note that biographers like Gordon too have made much about the divided self of Eliot. Anand would have us believe that Eliot was, at this time, trapped into a dry as dust, self-conscious, intellectualism, unable to let himself go free into the realms of the emotional and the irrational.

The next time that Anand meets Eliot is in Chapter 15, 'White Gods and Dark Gods', which, as the subtitle indicates is 'A Talk with T. S. Eliot in the *Criterion* Office' (118–24). Though Anand does not tell us the exact dates of his conversations, some internal clues are suggestive. Here he says, 'Gossip in Jacob Schwartz's shop had it that he was soon going to declare himself Anglo–Catholic in religion, Royalist in politics and Classicist in literature' (118). So the date must be a little before Eliot's

conversion to Anglicanism in 1927 and his famous proclamation of faith in 1928 (Behr 32–5). This is how Anand interprets Eliot's conversion:

> I knew that T. S. Eliot has made his choice. He seemed to imply that he had had the mystical experience. Perhaps he had been suffering from deep anguish. And like St. Paul he probably needed the Christian myth of the father, who had become incarnate as Christ (119).

As the conversation proceeds, Anand and Eliot talk about Shankara, Christ, Plato and Kierkegaard. The central issue is the pursuit of truth or the higher life. Eliot says 'One has to live as if one is an apostle' (122). Anand is impressed by Eliot's austerity and 'stern courage':

> I became aware that the harsh mask of Mr. Eliot hid a kind of humanity which he was too intellectually proud to show to people. Hence the assertiveness. Unlike Kierkegaard he did not want to reveal his personal sufferings (123).

Anand on the other hand, repeatedly refers to himself as being 'romantic', 'extroverted', 'naive', 'impetuous' and 'irrepressible'. While Eliot wants to rediscover the springs of tradition, Anand would have us begin all over again, questioning everything, almost like Faust (124). Eliot says:

> At one time, I felt that if India had accepted Christianity and given up the dark gods, things would have been better. At one time you had the Buddha, who rid India of many superstitions (124).

The remark though in its qualifier, 'at one time', is enigmatic, it is characteristic of Eliot's attitude to India in *Conversations in Bloomsbury*. He has clearly outgrown his Indian phase and is able to distance himself from the sources of his earlier inspiration. The conversation ends with Eliot handing Anand a packet of books to do notes on for the *Criterion* and offering to meet him again.

The next meeting in Chapter 17 also takes place at the *Criterion* office. Anand has written a note on Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* (1819) and has brought it to Eliot to see. In this conversation, we see an interesting tug of war, a struggle not only between Anand and Eliot, but also between India and the West. Anand argues in his note that Schopenhauer's interpretation of Shankara as a pessimist is not quite accurate, that Shankara had a sunny side to his character too. Anand finds that Eliot does not know this either. In the ensuing tussle, Eliot becomes aligned with Schopenhauer,

the West, Christianity, St Thomas, while Anand is on the side of India, Shankara, Advaita and *Saundarya Lahari*. There is no doubt about the issue at stake: who, or which side, is right if not superior. Anand's thesis on Schopenhauer needs to be quoted:

> In the first paragraph I had prepared my exposition of Schopenhauer's thesis by saying how the European philosopher, whose outlook was akin to Shankara's, was a sad man who could not smile, while his Indian counterpart had a sunny temperament, and that while the Hindu found the world transient yet permanent, the German failed to connect himself with Being in the attempt at Becoming (129).

Obviously, this paragraph is in consonance with Anand's general agenda of interpreting the West, taming it and rendering it non-threatening. To safeguard his own identity, he cannot allow Schopenhauer to be 'greater' than Shankara, just as earlier he had to spring to Gandhi's defense when the later was attacked by Eliot and Dobree. But, it is Eliot who defines the discourse explicitly in political terms: 'Eliot suppressed his frown, smiled and said: 'You seem to feel that Shankara is superior to Schopenhauer!'"(129). To defend his position Anand begins a spiel, a familiar enough educative and persuasive activity for any Indian seeking recognition from a Western figure of authority, on the virtues and complexities of Shankara – how he walked all over India in the ninth century, established *mathams*, reorganized Hinduism, saved it from ritualism and superstition, how he was a child prodigy, a great philosopher and a poet. But, Eliot is not easy to persuade. He enquires if it would be possible that Shankara received his concept of the Divine Mother from the Christian idea of the Virgin Mother via St Thomas. Anand's response speaks for itself: 'There was a tremor down my spine at the insinuation that Shankara may have got grace from the Christians'(131). The conversation ends indecisively, with neither yielding much ground. Eliot regards Hindu doctrines as confused and self-contradictory: 'There you are – you see, the magical Hindu mind is always cloudy', said Eliot, 'Unclear' (131). Anand is silenced, but not convinced. He knows that Hinduism is 'amorphous' and all-embracing, but still is unable to resolve 'the peculiar paradox of differences – between realism and ideals [...] Like Whitman', he says, 'I want to include all contradictions in myself [...]' Eliot's laconic comment is telling: 'In hell...' he whispers. The conversation concludes by Eliot's quip on the *Waste Land*: 'I am going beyond it' (132).

Eliot, here, would like a clear, internally consistent, and lucid doctrine which is true and coherent at all levels. He seems to think that one has to make a commitment to such a doctrine and live by it. Anand, too, is looking for a faith which will serve him both as a philosophy and an aesthetic, but

is aware that Hinduism is ridden with paradoxes and contradictions which cannot be purged or defined away. Their similar goals but different approaches highlight the problematic of language itself, which today is so well recognized.

The last talk with Eliot is, significantly, titled 'Reason and Romanticism' (144–51). It appears that Anand met Eliot on several occasions before this meeting at the Schmidt's restaurant on Charlotte Street. Eliot had shown Anand some of his poems that later appeared as *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939). There are other markers to suggest the date too. Anand's own book, *The Hindu View of Art* (1933) is nearly completed. So we can take it that this conversation has occurred about eight years after Anand's first introduction into English literary society at the sherry party in Harold Monroe's bookshop after the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922). Anand still resorts to his familiar person: 'I walked to Schmidt's from the British Museum, uneasy, uncertain, feeling inferior and weak' (146). The fear and insecurity are still very much evident, but Anand's agenda for resistance too is. By now Anand's situation is also somewhat altered. This time, he has a foothold in the world of English letters. Eliot himself acknowledges this: he says about Anand's book, 'Oriental wisdom might begin to percolate through the English fog' (146). This witticism is, of course, a trifle sarcastic, but Eliot follows it up with an astonishingly generous compliment: 'One thing that your book *The Hindu View of Art* did for me was to send me to the Vedic hymns – also the Thirteen Principle Upanishads' (146).[2] Anand is so thrilled by the compliment as to be 'embarrassed'.

The conversation returns to Iqbal, the poet Anand admires so much. This time, Anand has persuaded Eliot to read Iqbal and Eliot is much more accepting: 'He seems to me to be a like mind – though old fashioned in his utterance! He certainly faces up to the problem before man today – to integrate…' (150). However, again, we see the familiar tensions cropping up. Eliot's imperialism resurfaces when Anand invites him to India: 'Your atmosphere is highly charged. In many ways, I wish that the Indians would tone down their politics and renew their culture […] We might gain from India – if it remains in the Empire' (150). Similarly, contrary to Eliot's deep suspicion of individualism and his faith in the community, Anand is attracted by Iqbal's emphasis on the individual will. There are no easy conclusions, but Eliot concedes: 'The problem of the individual for the subject races may be different' (151).

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[2] There is some confusion in the text regarding whether the book was actually published when this conversation took place or not. Earlier Eliot asks Anand if the latter has 'finished' his book. Then he says that one thing that the book did for him was to take him to the Vedas and Upanishads. Perhaps, Eliot read Anand's incomplete manuscript.

If I measure the Anand of this last conversation with the Anand who first met Eliot at Harold Monroe's sherry party, I see a significant difference. Though I cannot say that Anand has now become Eliot's equal or that he has succeeded in completely getting over his inferiority complex, I do not think that his relation with Eliot is less self-conscious and less unequal. He now has something to offer to the great poet, not merely to receive with humility and downcast eyes the literary and intellectual manna that the poet might condescend to shower upon him. Clearly, Anand is now no longer a nobody. He too has a voice, an identity, a place in this dialogue with Eliot. I would not say that the project of somebody in Anand's position is to dislodge and usurp the stronger poet's place but the struggling writer has made defensive and offensive gestures to safeguard his creative territory, to resist his colonization by a more powerful presence than himself. It is in this more modest agenda that Anand, to my mind, succeeds.

I have tried to suggest throughout this chapter that Anand's encounters with Eliot are usually in the form of contests between two strong, intelligent, curious, serious, creative writers. But the contest is complicated by the various factors of dominance/subordination such as race, nationality, authority, power and so on, which also enter in. I have tried to argue that these encounters can be understood against the background of colonialism as the struggle of the colonized writer to both learn from the metropolitan poet and yet not be subject to him. Usually, such encounters take place on native soil, but Anand's project acquires an aspect of daring because he has taken the fight against the West to the West itself. Anand's conversations, I think, have greater heuristic value than the usual literary criticism that Indian readers of Eliot have turned out, especially for Indian students. Indian students can find in Anand a role model of how to tackle what might seem an overwhelmingly dominating Western influence. Besides this value, the conversations are important as a source on Eliot's life, a source that I hope future biographers will note.

Finally, and for those of us interested in Indian English literature, the conversations are a source on Anand himself. At this point, the order of importance becomes reserved. For us, Anand is more central, more significant in a more limited context than is Eliot. But either way – by studying Anand or by studying Eliot through Anand – we are questioning certain received hierarchies of interpretation. Thus, in our own small way I hope this reading has helped both to reclaim what is ours and reassert its value when the intellectual and cultural relations between the West and India are still unequal and distorted.

# 3

# *COMRADE KIRILLOV*: A Critique of Communism

It is being increasingly recognized that Raja Rao is the most intellectually demanding of Indian English novelists. His texts have a discursive dimension which makes them essays on some of the major ideological and philosophical systems of our times. This concern with ideas and conceptual systems is typical of Raja Rao's fiction and is noticeable from his earliest works. *Kanthapura* (1938), for instance, is both an exploration and an exposition of Gandhian ideology, worked out through its application to a small, remote South Indian village. *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is a compendium of philosophical disquisitions on Vedanta, Bhakti, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Indian and European history, mysticism, mythology, metaphysics and so on. In fact, the novel is an exploration of India as an idea in contact with the West; as Rama, the protagonist puts it, 'India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic' (376). *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), too, is a Vedantic–Shakespearean parable on the working of self-surrender and grace or what Govindan Nair calls 'the way of the Cat'. Finally, Raja Rao's much awaited, finally released tome, *The Chessmaster and his Moves* (1988), continues and intensifies the debates of *The Serpent and the Rope*. Among other things, it is a dialogue between a Brahmin and a Rabbi, symbolizing the quintessential confrontation between India and the West, the vertical and the horizontal, zero and infinity respectively. In short, Raja Rao is a philosopher–novelist whose works accord a primacy to the evaluation and comprehension of ideas.

It would seem unlikely, then, that a major ideological system such as Communism would escape his interest or scrutiny. Raja Rao's idealist–spiritualist–traditionalist position would naturally be in total antithesis to the materialist dogmas of Communism. There are, no doubt, stray references to this effect in *The Serpent and the Rope* and in other texts, but it is in *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) that we find a fuller discussion. The text invites added attention

especially with the precipitative collapse of Communism in the former USSR and in Eastern Europe. It would be an exaggeration to say that Raja Rao predicted this in *Comrade Kirillov*, but he did portray the defeat of one, largely Stalinist, brand of Indian Communism. The novel satirizes the behaviour of Indian Communists during a specific historical period. Ultimately, Raja Rao's central thesis is that Communism is unsuitable to India because it is incompatible with the essentially spiritual character of the 'real' India. Ironically, Raja Rao's views are yet to be proven in India. Communism may have failed in Europe, but it is still alive and well in India – of course, in a peculiarly Indian avatar, which has more or less compromised with parliamentary democracy. Yet, Raja Rao's commentary on the mutations of international Communism and on its Indian variations make *Comrade Kirillov* a fascinating text which invites, nay demands, a critical rereading today.

*Comrade Kirillov*, fourth in order of publication, is the least discussed of Raja Rao's novels. The criticism of the novel has, so far, concentrated on the character of Kirillov, particularly on his 'divided consciousness'; on Raja Rao's ironic treatment of it; on the central thematic conflict in the book between Kirillov's faith in Communism and his love for traditional India; in the novel's literary sources and its relation to Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*; and also, to some extent, on the political issues raised in the novel. It is this last area that I would like to explore further here. This chapter will consider, first, the importance of politics in the novel; secondly, the political background; and thirdly, the possible historical sources of Kirillov's character.

It is necessary to recognise that politics is a central rather than peripheral concern in *Comrade Kirillov*. The very first sentence of the novel, 'I first met Communism in Kirillov' (7), would seem to highlight this, as would a remark made in one of its earliest reviews: 'It is difficult to overlook the political overtones especially since the novel is replete with references to the failings in the practice of world communism' (Rajan, 51). The novel is, hence, an extended discussion and critique of Communism, especially from an Indian's point of view.

It seems to me that this feature of the novel can be connected with Raja Rao's own involvement in the freedom struggle in India. M K Naik in his monograph cryptically refers to this phase in the novelist's career:

> During the 'Quit India' movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1942, he (Raja Rao) was associated with the underground activities of the young socialist leaders (*Raja Rao,* 20).

Because the major events in the novel have to do with this period, it is necessary to understand the situation referred to above in a little more detail. On 9

August 1942, following the 'Quit India' resolution, Gandhi and the entire leadership of the Congress party which was spearheading the anti-colonial struggle, were arrested and imprisoned. Three months later, on 9 November, six political prisoners, in a daring attempt, escaped from jail. These were the young Socialists, a faction within the Congress, not to be confused with the Communists. It was then that, with the old leaders of the party still in jail, the Socialists first gained recognition as national leaders. Jayaprakash Narayan, Achyut Patwardhan and Aruna Asaf Ali – the most prominent among them – began to direct the struggle against the British. Evading arrest by going 'underground', they did much to restore the morale of the movement. Presumably, it was with this group that Raja Rao was associated in 1942. Significantly, it was during this period that the Communist Party of India (CPI), as we shall see in detail later, chose to support the British. Raja Rao, being closely involved in these events would have had a first hand opportunity to examine the functioning of the Indian Communists.

It is therefore clear that an examination of political issues and specific events is crucial to an understanding of the novel and evaluation of the protagonist's character.

## II

One of the most important events in Kirillov's life in this chapter is the support of Britain's war against Germany. This position is quite in opposition to Kirillov's earlier stand on the war, when following the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939, Kirillov had opposed Britain and its 'Imperialist War'. However, subsequent to Hitler's attack on Russia in 1941, Kirillov, after a period of 'seminal psychosis' (60), almost akin to the 'dark night of the soul' (57) undergoes a transformation:

> Somehow this inner conversion appeared almost to have changed his skin – he seemed suddenly to see the skin of Irene on his own wrist and hand, as if by divine compassion. Stalin had made him white – the Indian struggle now entered the international arena, and Marx was justified (60–1).

Kirillov's thesis, which contains many quotations from Stalin, Lenin and Marx, is accepted by the party, to his great elation:

> The party, knowing the scrupulous pertinency of Kirillov's arguments, asked for a final report on the matter. That was one of the greatest days of his life. Messianic emotion surged up his throat, and he went and kissed Irene kindly on her fattening cheeks (63–4).

This event and Raja Rao's transparently ironic treatment of it, clearly satirizes Kirillov's changing political stance. What is being criticized is Kirillov's and the Communists' expediency and their defence of what is morally and ideologically indefensible. Raja Rao exposes this tendency to rationalize and explain away contradictions as a hallmark of Stalin's anti-democratic regime and by extension, the craven and imitative self-justifications of Indian Communists of that time. Significantly, Kirillov's ideological turn-about has been carefully prepared for by his views on two earlier issues: his justification of the Moscow trials in which Stalin liquidated his rivals, and his support of the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939.

In the first case, the narrator (R referred to as 'Rama' on p. 41 and later revealed to be Raja Rao himself on p. 116) goes to Kirillov to get his signature on an appeal on behalf of the Moscow undertrials:

> Kirillov, I want your signature. It's that a fair trial may be given to the Moscow accused. Here is the manifesto, look. The cause is good. Your politics is something I do not fully understand. Human suffering, life, birth, death, sickness, marriage, love, God, I understand. I hate violence of all sorts, especially political violence (42).

But Kirillov has no sympathy with such humanitarian views, nor does he have any compunctions regarding violence. Asked how the violence in the USSR and the trials could be justified, he responds with a classic use of Marxist dialectic:

> If you are weak and on the wrong side – the wrong side for us, as you know, is the weaker side – then you must inevitably go under (44).

Similarly, through Irene's diary, we learn of Kirillov's responses to Stalin's telegraph of congratulations to Hitler on Germany's conquest of Poland. Kirillov goes through an elaborate and convoluted process of justification, referring to the *Mantra–Sastra* in the process. The end result is an approval of Stalin's and history's ways:

> Stalin's congratulating Hitler could be reduced by sheer scientific computation to form some seventeen hundred wave-components. Hitler is pleased. Stalin gets his time. That is Marxism. Hitler's message is a psycho-chemical vibration in ether (98).

Both these incidents establish the peculiar morality of Kirillov: it is the morality in which the end justifies the means. Kirillov changes his positions on issues

according to party dictates. He justifies himself by believing that his morality is based on irrefutable scientific principles of Marxism: 'The only morality is scientific, and this is based on the inexorable laws of cause and effect' (37). It is on the basis of this mindset that he makes statements such as the following:

> Man is a biological equation, and Marxism has no traffickings with individuals. All men in Marxism have anonymous names, and death – this last biological fact – is an act of sheer surgery against betrayal (26–7).

Or

> If the biology of selective killing were understood, humanity might yet attain the clear apex of history [...] Death, the Moscow deaths, were the antiseptics of history – you kill for the beauty of your eyes (46).

If Kirillov can countenance the Stalinist purges and genocides it is no surprise that he can, with even less soul-searching, support the British during the Quit India movement.

To begin with, Kirillov is completely opposed to the British position in the war. At the height of Hitler's bombing of London, Kirillov is filled with grandiose dreams of the annihilation of the British Empire and of a united and free new world order:

> And once this bloody war is over, the arch of freedom would span the sky from Czechoslovakia to India – why from Greenland to Indonesia (55).

To him, Hitler is an agent of history, God-sent for this purpose:

> Hitler seemed almost an archangel, and his fire had communist ire. Stalin stood mightily behind Hitler – with the backing of the Russian bear the world would be steam-rolled (54).

However, Kirillov's plans are unsettled:

> Kirillov's prognostics this time however, went all wrong [...] Soviet Russia was attacked by Hitler, and the mechanism of Marxist dialectics changed (57).

The last sentence pithily suggests the aforementioned transformation in Kirillov's position.

Kirillov now finds himself deeply distressed, trying to reconcile his previous anti-imperialist position on the war with this new turn of events:

> Kirillov waited, and waited, with bated breath (his wife surely worried about his health) to know what new turns history would take. His long intimacy with history had quickly made him into an alien, and he had no illumination – it was the 'dark night of the soul' (57).

Finally, the directive comes from Stalin himself:

> Stalin had now given the party directive. We toe the British line. This is the people's war, and India was on the right side – the British side – and he who speaketh against them sells himself to the enemy (59).

To obey Stalin would be to reverse his earlier position. Kirillov reasons with himself thus:

If Stalin had asked India to side with the British, Stalin had a definite, logical construction on which to base his conclusions (60).

Then, he experiences his critical illumination:

> He sat himself down, one morning, and wrote a brilliant thesis on the subject. He was inspired like a poet, and his arguments came easily and learnedly. He wrote it all down, handed the document to the right party authority, and looked at his wife for the first time in true sweetness (60).

With this sea change in his position on the war, from virulent opposition of the British to total support, Kirillov suddenly finds himself in favour with the British:

> It was a great, a very great day in the history of India. Comrade Kirillov now became Mr. Padmanabhan Kirillov, his skin shone as on the first day of creation. He could walk up the great steps of any British Secretariat without being looked at askance, and the right passes came in due time. The British Council now turned culture-conscious, invited Kirillov into varied assemblies, and before his receptive audiences Kirillov developed astonishing labour theories on the people's war. The Indian Communist Weekly changed its name from National Front to People's War, and versatile writers exposed the great popular enthusiasm wrought by Soviet Policy in the working classes of Bombay and Calcutta (61).

These events, namely Kirillov's opposition to the war, his subsequent support of it, and finally, his finding favour with the British, reflect very closely the politics of the Communist Party of India during the same period. In fact, the parallels are so close as to suggest that Raja Rao was using Kirillov's story as an allegorical critique of Communism in general and the conduct of the CPI in particular.

The facts of the case are so well known that I shall only provide a brief summary from R C Majumdar's *History of the Freedom Movement in India*:

> The Communists, all over the world, outside Russia, were puzzled by the Hitler–Stalin Pact in August 1939. But they had to obey instructions from Moscow. So Hitler ceased to be a Fascist menace, and became a friend of peace, while England and France were the imperialist war-mongers.
>
> But as soon as Germany invaded Russia on 22 June 1941 all these were changed as if by the wand of a magician. The authorities of international Communism demanded that the CPI must support the British war efforts as they contributed to the defence of the Soviet Union, the Fatherland of Communism [...] The Imperial War became overnight a People's War by the magic wand of Communism.
>
> The official attitude towards the CPI also underwent a complete change. The Communist leaders were set free, and on July 1942, the ban against the Communist Party was lifted. Henceforth the CPI functioned as a legal party and enjoyed the favours of the Government of India. Persons kept in detention on account of Communist activities were used by the Government as a counterpoise to the Congress. The spectacle was thus witnessed in India – the leftist Communist Party being anti-national and pro-imperial, and eating up the very words by which they had so long incited the people against imperial and war-monger British (569).

These events, if not the above interpretation of them, are corroborated by the standard works on the subject.

The direction of Raja Rao's satire is seen in how closely Kirillov's unbounded devotion to the USSR resembles actual documents of the CPI:

> Soviet defeats were turned into Marxist mannerisms of inevitable success – the working classes must and would inevitably win – and the battle for India was fought within the walls of Stalingrad. One day when the Indian bourgeoise would be liquidated, Stalingrad would shape a statue for great Stalin, Leader and Father of the Soviet Land (61–2).

Compare the above passage from the novel with the following excerpt from the CPI's Party Letter of 13 December 1941:

> The attitude of the Communist Parties to war is always determined not by any national or local considerations but by the single consideration: international unity and action of the world proletariat to strike at world imperialism, to defend the Socialist Fatherland (9).

The language of Kirillov's internal monologue, thus, echoes the Party Letter; Raja Rao shows how propaganda beclouds an individual's judgement. The contradictions in Kirillov's character are deftly exposed.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find Kirillov sticking to the Russian line even when events in India do not go as forecast. Gandhi's Quit India movement evoked an enthusiastic response in India, while those who continued to support the British lost ground. Yet Kirillov's faith in his Soviet mentors remain undiminished:

> Whatever the peculiarity of the Indian situation, Russia was wedged to her promise – this shall be a people's war and the Allies must be sustained. Stalin had studied the problem, his decision had been made. One need not worry him again – he was busy with other matters. The party line was now given: and it was not to be changed for the moment. Kirillov found Stalin uncomfortable – but as a Marxist leader, Stalin had, of course, the right perspective (64).

The quotation, through its ironic tone, clearly underscores Kirillov's blind faith in Stalin.

By this comparison between the actual political events of the period and Kirillov's attitudes to them, it is clear that the latter reflect the positions and policies of the CPI. The most notable of these parallels are:

a. The attitude to the Moscow trials.
b. The position on the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939.
c. The opposition to Britain's imperialist war.
d. Support of Britain's 'People's war'.
e. The political advantages of the shift in position.
f. The reasons for an unswerving loyalty to the Soviet line.

Thus, *Comrade Kirillov*, in addition to being an ironic portrait of a conflict-ridden Indian expatriate intellectual, also offers a critique of the political fluctuations and manoeuvres of the CPI during the 1930s and 1940s. Raja

Rao is indirectly exposing what he sees as the inconsistencies, contradictions and self-deceptions of Communism as it is actually practised by its adherents, particularly of the pre-Independence Indian variety. The novel, therefore, has historical and ideological ramifications beyond what may commonly be perceived.

Besides being a commentary and an allegorical portrayal of actual events in India, the novel is significant as criticism of Stalinism in particular and the hegemony of master discourses in general. Although Raja Rao's critique is grounded in what is clearly a national–spiritual–liberal–humanitarian tradition, he is quick to identify the lapses, excesses, errors and contradictions within Communism. For him, Communism is wrong not so much because it is materialist–historicist, but because of its distortions of rationality. It represents human engineering gone awry. That he could articulate his opposition so clearly in an era in which the eventual collapse of Communism was not even a remote possibility is remarkable.

Raja Rao's, and by implication, history's verdict on Kirillov and what he stands for is curt and brief, quite in contrast to the indulgent tone in which the latter is ordinarily treated:

> Comrade Kirillov played an anonymous role in international history. 1942 came and with it the great Indian revolution. Churchill was shaken, and though Britain prolonged her commitments for another four years, India was lost to them in 1942. The Communist party backed Britain, and lost their 1917. Mahatma Gandhi won. He would always win, for he knew India (69).

Symbolically, Kirillov never returns to India; instead he is last heard of in Peking (121).

## III

Finally, I would like to address the question of the sources of the character of Kirillov. Naik has already examined the relation of the book to its chief literary source, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* in which the original Kirillov may be found. In this connection, it only needs to be pointed out that Raja Rao would sometimes seem to confuse Kirillov with Shatov, another character in *The Possessed*. For instance, in Raja Rao's novel, Kirillov is spoken of as rushing to the midwife, delirious with joy, when he finds out that his wife Marie is pregnant with another man's child (49). In the original of Dostoevsky, it is Shatov, not Kirillov, whose wife Marie is pregnant with another man's child. Similar references elsewhere in the

novel have been corrected by an insertion of the phrase ‘like Shatov’ (25–9), thereby making Raja Rao’s Kirillov an amalgam of both Kirillov and Shatov of Dostoevsky.

Besides this literary source, Kirillov, as pointed by others (see Dey and Srivastava for example), closely resembles Rama, the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope* in several ways including the Brahminical background, the philosophic disposition, foreign wife, expatriate status, preoccupation with Indians, interest in the Albegensian heresy, chanting of Sankara, and so on. Moving from fictive to factual sources, Narasingh Srivastava is of the opinion that Kirillov closely resembles Raja Rao himself. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that Ramaswamy, Kirillov and R, the narrator of *Comrade Kirillov*, are all versions of a prototype loosely derived from Raja Rao’s own experience.

Other historical sources have been suggested by V V Badve in a review-article on the book: ‘So we have in Kirillov J. Krishnamurti, Krishna Menon (and perhaps M N Roy) all rolled into one’. The first option is unlikely because Krishnamurti, clearly, is mentioned as a separate character in the novel (9–14) and Kirillov is supposed to have been his disciple. Besides, there are no major resemblances between the two.

The second option has been discussed by Naik:

> Raja Rao’s Kirillov appears, at least in some significant respects to be modelled upon the noted Indian statesman V.K. Krishna Menon, who, like Kirillov, was a brilliant, versatile and voluble South Indian expatriate. He too, like Raja Rao’s hero, came early under the spell of Mrs. Annie Besant, and was sent abroad for education as a young man, having been earmarked for becoming a pillar of the Theosophist movement in India. Menon, however, became similarly associated with the British Labour Party. Unlike Kirillov however, however, he never married and never became a Communist…(‘Raja Rao’s Comrade Kirillov’ 115).

The crucial difference pointed out by Naik himself, that Menon never became a Communist, makes this an unlikely resemblance. After all, almost the entirety of Kirillov’s character derives, as the title suggests, from his being a Communist.

The third possibility, that of M N Roy as a source, needs to be examined more seriously. Curiously enough, there are several parallels; first, Roy, whose original name was Narendranath Bhattacharya, like Kirillov, came from a Brahmin family. Secondly, like Kirillov’s earlier devotion to theosophy, Roy was an ardent nationalist, deeply influenced by the religious ideas of leaders like Swami Vivekananda. Thirdly, like Kirillov, he changed his name to Manabendra Nath Roy. Fourthly, he too ‘converted’ to Communism like Kirillov.

Fifthly, he married a European. Sixthly, he too wrote a paper, which was widely acclaimed, for the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. Seventhly, he supported the British during the war. Finally, he too had an ambivalent attitude to Gandhi and other Congress leaders, and he too, like Kirillov, went to China for some time.

Though these similarities exist, the differences, too, abound. The chief of these is that M N Roy was an intellectual heavyweight, taken seriously both in India and abroad, not an object of amusement like Kirillov. Also, he was actively involved in Indian politics, unlike Kirillov who remains an expatriate. Finally, Roy moved away from Communism when he found that it had betrayed its ideals. He proposed a new philosophy called Radical Humanism instead. Kirillov, of course, is more a follower than a leader and never moves away from Communism.

There is one more possible source for Kirillov which needs to be examined. Kirillov bears a close resemblance to Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880–1942), one of Sarojini Naidu's younger brothers. He was a revolutionary whose portrait can be found in Martyrs' Hall, Calcutta. He was an exile who worked against imperialism all his life. Like Kirillov, he was from a Brahmin family. His major work was his thesis on India and world imperialism, co-authored by G A Luganin and P Khankhoje, presented at the Third Congress of the Communist International. The thesis was sent to Lenin and he even responded to it in a letter dated 8 July 1921. There are other references to Chattopadhyaya in the *Collected Works of Lenin*. Chattopadhyaya was not married, but had a long-term relationship with the Communist leader Agnes Sedly. His later years were lonely and poverty-stricken.

Finally, in an interview with me, Raja Rao himself told me who the original of Comrade Kirillov was:

> Raja Rao revealed him to be a man called Shevalkar, a Maratha Brahmin from Tanjore, who became India's ambassador to Russia. He married a European woman called Mary. Apparently, he was on the KGB payroll, if not spying for them. Inadvertently, he helped India by toeing the Soviet line during the Quit India movement and alienating the whole of India from the Communists. He wrote an anti-Gandhian response in refutation of a book on *ahimsa* by Aldous Huxley. His income was reported to have come from translations from German and other literary work, but he was probably a spy. After the break up of the Soviet Union, Raja Rao wondered if many such stories of Indians spying for Russia had come to light.

Actually, the name was K (Krishnarao) S (Shivarao) Shevlankar (1906–1996), a well-known journalist who wrote *The Problem of India* in 1940 for Penguin, considered quite significant when it was published. In the novel, we have Kirillov's elation when his 'thesis' is accepted. Shevlankar was a well-known admirer of the USSR and went on to become the Indian envoy to Moscow.

Overall, despite these resemblances, it would seem that Kirillov is not an individual but a type, based on an amalgam of various people, real and fictional. I have, however, tried to show that there is a historical category on which Kirillov has been based – the Indian Communist of Brahmin ancestry, married to a European, and in exile from India.

## IV

After trying to trace the historical and political background of the novel, the question of what Kirillov stands for needs to be addressed. As I have shown, at one level, Kirillov is an expatriate Indian intellectual and an Indian Communist in exile. But he is also an idea and a symbol. He is the vehicle of the author's discussion and criticism of Communism in idea and practice, somewhat similar to Dostoevsky's symbolic use of characters in *The Possessed* to explore the psychological and political bases of the revolutionary movements of the later part of nineteenth century Russia. That Raja Rao employs Kirillov not only as an individual character, but also as a political and psychological type is, no doubt, amply clear from the entire thrust of the book. But there are, in addition, some direct statements in the text which support such a claim: 'there are a million Kirillovs – Indian, Chinese, Albanian, Egyptian, North-Siberian, Guadeloupian, Greenlandian, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese' (49). Kirillov represents, then, not only the practice of Indian Communism of a certain period in particular, but many facets of international Communism in general. He is Raja Rao's vehicle for a critique against the entire ideological apparatus of Stalinism.

In the Indian context, Kirillov is the antithesis of the thesis that is, by implication, Mahatma Gandhi. The latter, for Raja Rao, is the 'true' Indian and the modern representative of traditional India. In this dialectic struggle, there is no Hegelian synthesis in the end; rather the result is the triumph of the Gandhian–Brahminical thesis. For, as the author says, 'Mahatma Gandhi had won. He would always win, for he knew India' (69).

The defeat of what Kirillov stands for is reinforced in the concluding section of the book when the narrator initiates Kirillov's son into the mysteries of India: 'A few days later Kamal and I left on a pilgrimage to the South. I wanted to show Kamal my India' (122). If Kirillov is the symbol of an Indian

Communism that is alienated from the 'true' spirit of India, the reclamation of his symbolic offspring by India at the end once again underscores the ultimate inefficiency and reabsorption of such a Communism. The novel ends with Kamal's reintegration into the orthodox and traditional India of the author:

> When evening came again, and the wind had totally fallen, I dressed Kamal in sacred silk, gave him his silver waist-band, and sandal on his face, showed him to Mother Kanyakumari. Between the lamps and the bright Goddess, we heard the leaping adoration of the ninth moon ocean.

Raja Rao's portrayal of Communism through the vacillating and divided character of Kirillov may perhaps, be an unfair or exaggerated representation. Yet it is based on sufficient historical evidence to be taken seriously. The only way to refute it would be to question his basic premise about the 'true' nature of the Indian mind and culture. If, indeed, India is a country whose unique and special orientation is spiritual, then the fate to which he consigns Communism is unavoidable. However, it is possible to argue that India is not a culture and civilization which is primarily spiritual, but rather a plural space open to various contesting world views and ideologies. No matter how much the spiritual might be construed to be the dominant strand of this culture – for such has been the view of not just Western orientalists, but of a long line of significant Indian thinkers from Rammohan Roy to Vinoba Bhave – it cannot and must not pretend to be the sole or primary one.

Hence, there is ample room for conflicting philosophies and ideologies, whether materialist or spiritualist, in India. If so, then India can provide a hospitable climate for the flourishing of a multiplicity of viewpoints, one of which has certainly been Communism. In fact, in spite of its collapse in Europe, an entire spectrum of Left ideologies flourishes in India. The CPM (The Communist Party of India [Marxist]), one such Communist Party in India, has ever been ruling Bengal for many years, having won its position not through the bullet but through the ballot.

# 4

# 'A HORSE AND TWO GOATS': Language, Culture and Representation in R K Narayan's Fiction

## I

This chapter examines a well-known short story 'A Horse and Two Goats', to address three questions regarding the art and achievement of its author, R K Narayan. The first question pertains to a reevaluation of R K Narayan's oeuvre on the occasion of his hundredth birth anniversary, which took place in 2006.[1] Is he really a great writer? If so, how do we know it? The second question touches on the debate started by V S Naipaul about the 'Hindu' (non-modern, non-Western) mentality that pervades Narayan's world. Is Naipaul right? The answers to both questions are tied up with the third and chief question, which is that of language and representation in Narayan's writings and which I shall take up first.

I shall argue that Narayan, in a manner of speaking, 'solves' the problem of representing Indian reality in a (not entirely Indian language) English by crafting a special kind of style, which we may call an artful plainness. This strategy, which is the opposite of Raja Rao's or Salman Rushdie's, relies on a largely correct, syntactically and lexically limited, narrative technique to create an effect that exceeds its form. The key, in other words, to understanding Narayan's unique contribution to Indian English literature and to reevaluating his greatness is this question of language and representation. Narayan's achievement lies in a minimalism. His understatement signifies a certain modesty both as the author of the novels and in the characters that inhabit his works, who are also somewhat weak-willed and unassertive. Quite unlike the

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a paper in a commemorative international conference on Narayan organized by the Sahitya Akademi and held at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, from 10–12 October 2006.

braggadocio of Rushdie, Narayan's reductionism actually creates an expressive magnification and resonance that teases us to find more in him than is obvious at once. I try to prove this hypothesis through a close reading of one of Narayan's best known short stories, 'A Horse and Two Goats'.

## II

Representation across – and for that matter within – cultures and languages is fraught with obvious and subtle difficulties. To what extent is a culture 'translatable' or to what extent can a language like English in India 'cross over' between native and non-native contexts? This question may be addressed by examining R K Narayan's stylistic genius, which derives from a paring down and flattening of language. Narayan's approach to the problem of representing Indian reality in English is thus not the embedded complexity and elasticity of Raja Rao's various 'Englishes' or the lusty exuberance of Rushdie's linguistic excesses, but a kind of deculturation, so that 'Narayanese' becomes a 'basic' language which may stand for itself or any other (Indian) language. I consider this an unanxious way of being Indian, at home in English, though not necessarily a part of it. We can see this technique in most of his works, but the short story 'A Horse and Two Goats' illustrates it in a typical, almost paradigmatic manner.

'A Horse and Two Goats' was first published in *The Hindu* in 1960. Ten years later it became the title story of R K Narayan's seventh collection of short stories, *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* (1970). It was republished in another selection of Naryan's stories in 1985 in *Under the Banyan Tree*. This collection, published by Heinemann in the UK and Viking–Penguin in the US, reached an even wider audience. In the last fifteen years, the story has also been included in two anthologies of post-colonial writing, which attests to its importance as a teaching text in Western countries. Though Narayan is best known for his fourteen novels, I have chosen this story for detailed discussion not only because it illustrates the problem of cross-cultural representation that I want to take up, but also because it is one of the very few of Narayan's works which does not take place in Malgudi. I'll talk of the implications of this later. The story has not attracted much critical attention apart from being seen as a fine example of Narayan's dexterity in creating engaging characters and humorous dialogue. Certainly, it has not been read in a manner in which I am attempting here.

The story is also significant because it offers a textbook case of both the problems of representing India in English and how some of these can be overcome. The story may be read as a trope for the possibilities and limitations of all cross-cultural attempts at communication. The story is narrated in two

parts. In the first, we are offered an informative slice of life of the main characters, Muni and his wife, with an account of their daily habits, marital relationship, memories of better days, present strategies of survival and their interactions with neighbours.

In the second part, we have the crucial encounter between two cultures, which we may recount in the following fashion. An American tourist encounters a poor Tamil goatherd in a remote village where his station wagon runs out of gas. The goatherd is resting under an ancient statue of a man on a horse. The American wants to buy the statue from the goatherd, thinking that the latter owns it. The goatherd has no idea of what the American wants, but is grateful to get a free cigarette from the latter. They conduct a long conversation in which neither understands a word of the other. The American tells him why he wants the statue, how he will transport it, where he will keep it, and so on. The goatherd tells him about his life in the village, his past, and, inevitably, about Karma and Dharma. In the end, the American gives the goatherd one hundred rupees; the goatherd believes that it is a very good price for his two skinny goats. He thinks he has at last understood the American. Leaving the goats with the latter, he goes home with the money. The American thinks that he's really made a good bargain, quite literally a 'steal'. He stops a passing truck, pays for both gas and help in putting the statue into his station wagon, and leaves. The story ends on an uncertain note when the two goats find their way home. The bewildered goatherd is berated by his wife for having stolen the hundred rupees.

The encounter between Muni and the American, which forms the backbone of the story, may be schematized as follows, to illustrate the 'Clash of Cultures'[2] between them:

| The red-faced man (the American) | Muni |
|---|---|
| 1. Speaks no Tamil. | Only knows 'Yes, no' in English. |
| 2. Thinks that Muni sits 'like other souvenir sellers' in this country presiding over their wares. | Thinks that 'the red-faced man' in khaki could only be a policeman. |
| 3. Is a member of five book clubs. | Is illiterate, but versed in the myths of the land. |
| 4. Communicates for commerce. | Communicates to explain history, myth. |
| 5. Buys the statue as a conversation piece, without knowing anything about it. | Thinks he is selling the man his two goats. |

[2] Adapted from the teaching tools posted on an American university website [http://www.laits.utexas.edu/doherty/a/narayan.html], accessed on 5 October 2006.

On deeper reflection, it is clear that the problem in the story is an old one, almost endemic to Indian English literature. At its most basic, the question is how to represent in English a conversation that is taking place in another language. But in this story, the conversation is actually across languages because one person speaks American, while the other knows only Tamil. So, Narayan's English must stand, alternately, for American English and Tamil; in addition, it must also stand for itself, that is, the kind of English that the third person omniscient narrator uses. Can one language stand not just for another, but for three? How or under what circumstances can it do so? I think that what this story shows is that if you can pare down a language, any language, to a basic medium, then this unembellished, plain tongue may stand in stead of or for any other. To invoke Bhartrihari, it is a sort of attempt to go from *vaikhari* to *madhyama*, to go from the specific, articulated language, to a simple system of signs – from English to just language, so to speak. Apparently, someone has counted the number of words that are most used in Narayan's works, which amount to just 500 or so. This makes his language like an English for everyday conversation of the kind that guides and handbooks for non-native or foreign learners of the language might use. In other words, Narayan achieved more with less. N Ram, invoking R L Stevenson, called it 'the art of omission', which he calls 'the secret knowledge' that characterizes much of Narayan's work (1). By withholding or holding back, through reticence and humility, rather than through ornamentation or crookedness or hybridity or exuberance or bragging does Narayan accomplish more than what many other Indian English writers do? The meaning of his text, thus, lies beneath or beyond the text and words, not in it.

I would now like to consider why this story is set in Kritam, not in Malgudi. The very first sentence of the story underlines the importance of the setting:

> 'Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India, in which the majority of India's five hundred million live, flourish, and die, Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot…' (14).

To use a suggestive phrase that we heard earlier in the conference, Kritam is inner India, not the 'middle' India of Malgudi. And yet, the village, insignificant as it is, is called K[i]ritam or 'coronet' (14). That's because small, in a typical Narayan fashion, is not necessarily insignificant. The story may easily be divided into two parts. The first, quite detailed in fact, establishes the background and works as a launching pad for the encounter between the American and Muni, which makes up the bulk of the story. The encounter is therefore emblematic,

framed and highlighted so that its implications far exceed the limited world of Kritam.

What is it that really distinguishes Kritam from Malgudi? The story suggests that it is the stark absence of English. The marginalization of this village is measured by how deprived it is of the master's tongue; in fact, Narayan also hints that the village has actually retreated deeper inland, moving away from the main highway a couple of miles (19). The distance from the highway is also a moving away from English. That is why the 'red man' cries: 'Can't you understand even a simple word of English? Everyone in this country seems to know English. I have gotten along with English everywhere in this country, but you don't speak it. Have you any religious or spiritual scruples against English speech?' Later, Muni actually explains why he doesn't know English. He didn't go to school because he had to work in the fields: 'I don't know the Parangi language you speak, even little fellows in your country probably speak the Parangi language, but here only learned men and officers know it' (24). Though Muni is so bereft of this language, funnily enough he knows more of it than the American knows of Tamil. His entire vocabulary of the paradoxical 'yes, no' suggests the impasse of village India when confronted with English and modernity. It cannot say a whole hearted yea nor a resounding nay, but must remain locked into this self-defeating 'yes–no'. The American's frustration is summed up in this desperate exclamation:

> 'Is there no one, absolutely no one here, to translate for me?'

In contrast to Kritam, Malgudi is a site where mediation and translation are possible, where there is a cultural commingling and exchange. Kritam, on the other hand, is a place where there is no translation, at least between English and Tamil. This absence of linguistic commerce defines its limitations but becomes, paradoxically, the primary source of its fictional material. Thus, it is this limitation in itself that the whole story exploits. This limitation leads to the representational problematic of the story. As a theoretical aside, we might posit that the India that any fictional text tries to represent may be classified into four distinct units:

*Desh* (Inner India)
Town (Middle India)
City (Outer India)
Metropolis (Outside India)

These terms signify spaces which are of course imprecise and overlapping, but still easily identifiable and distinct. We might even classify them in terms of

access to English. *Desh* or inner India is where English is almost non-existent, even if it is not invisible. Middle India aspires to English and this is reflected in a great number of English medium 'public' schools all over. Outer India is properly English speaking, even if one hears many other languages in it. 'Out of India' refers to spaces both within the country which are occupied by multinational corporations and to diasporas spread across the world; both spaces are characterized by English monolingualism. The diversity of languages of India is almost absent here. Kritam, *desh* or inner India, is devoid of English and therefore a place where no translation is possible, at least to those who are cultural monolinguals. Even the more sophisticated, English-dominated sites may be equally devoid of fictional richness or complexity if they are constituted by linguistic singularity instead of plurality. The latter derives not just from multilingualism but also from the possibilities of translation. As far as English-deprived and materially impoverished Kritam is concerned, the very tension between English and Tamil manages to provide a richness to an otherwise flat creative landscape.

Despite the fact that just before the transaction goes through, the 'mutual mystification' between the foreigner and Muni is complete (28), they do manage to strike a deal. Moreover, it is not that the 'red man' is totally unaffected by Muni's Tamil: 'The Tamil that Muni spoke was stimulating even as pure sound, and the foreigner listened with fascination. 'I wish I had my tape-recorder here [...] Your language sounds wonderful. I get a kick out of every word you utter, here, – he indicated his ears...' (24). Muni is an illiterate, low-caste shepherd, who never went to school, Muni's Tamil is nevertheless 'chaste', heir in fact of the famous poetess Avaiyar: 'Out of this heritage the Tamil language gushed through Muni in an unimpeded flow' (21). In fact, then, the asymmetry is not as pronounced as it seems; what Muni says is far more meaningful, even philosophically valuable, than the American's sole focus on buying the horse. Is Narayan suggesting that what we can give the West is wisdom while they can pay us back in hard cash – the kind of exchange that Swami Vivekananda hinted at a hundred years ago?

This chapter has been about the difficulty of containing, confining or reducing the multiculturalism and multilingualism of India into the restricted, simplified and flattened monolingualism of English. Sometimes, something that is simpler may indeed be made to stand for something rather more complex. I have tried to illustrate this substitution by showing that Narayan overcomes the limitation of language not by trying to embellish, *chutnify*, or tweak English, but by simplifying, withholding and paring down; this way the signified always exceeds the signifier, like the *dhvani* that the ancient Indian aestheticians and rhetoricians had theorized.

From a post-colonial perspective, the story merely hints at issues of cultural inequality and plunder, especially considering that the horse, is not only an important part of the invaluable and hoary heritage of the village but, according to Muni, it is also the village guardian. It is likened to the Kalki avatar who 'will trample down all men' at the, apocalyptic end of this yuga' (25). Now, with his guardian deity 'sold', is little and remote Kritam unprotected and undefended from the incursions of the wider world? Would Muni have collaborated with the 'red man' had he (Muni) known his true intention of taking away the horse? Or would Muni's, and by extension, Narayan's much condemned Hindu view of the world ultimately result in copping out from all the challenges of the 'real' world? As Muni tells the 'red man', 'God will always save us whenever we are troubled by evil beings' (26). The genial American, who offers two strong roasted tobacco cigarettes to an impecunious goatherd, is actually regarded with the general distrust that villagers regard all men in khaki, 'evidently a policeman or a soldier' (20). 'Beware of khaki', Muni says to himself twice (21), no doubt recalling the coercive and brutal colonial state apparatus of policemen, tax collectors, soldiers and other colonial administrators. But this foreigner is not English, but American, not interested in collecting taxes or keeping the law, but in collecting exotic objects from remote parts of the world. Does the story suggest that American-dominated economic imperialism has come to replace its older British kin?

While questions such as these are quite crucial, the story remains, more properly, about a mutually unintelligible conversation between an English speaker and a Tamil speaker. The whole text is, of course, written in English, though more that one half of it is supposed to occur in Tamil. In this case, however, the reader is never in any doubt which is which because both are marked so clearly. What is more, this partially successful, partially failed conversation shows a modest and self-conscious admission on the author's part of the limits and dangers not only of cross–cultural communication, but of cross-cultural translation and representation. The economic asymmetry and its effects suggest that what has occurred is a post, if not neo-colonial transaction. The well-intentioned American has actually appropriated a defining cultural artifact of the village without the villagers' consent or knowledge. The statue doesn't even belong to the goatherd in the first place, so how could he 'sell' it? The American, in effect, 'buys' what is not for sale. The miscommunication suggests that power will distort communication regardless of how well-intentioned the participants are. The windfall that the impecunious goatherd receives also bewilders and injures him in the end to the extent that his wife thinks he's stolen the money. This is a sort of tragic-comedy because like their mutually unintelligible languages, the value systems of the two interlocutors are also incommensurable. Narayan seems to point to

the futility of translating across cultures in certain circumstances even as his own choice of the English medium belies the story's message. Thus, the story paradoxically succeeds in showing that cross-cultural communication is possible by the very act of demonstrating the failure of such an attempt. It's like saying that it has succeeded because it communicates the impossibility of communication across cultures.

Narayan, in my opinion, succeeds where several Indian English writers fail because of this liminality that he manages to invoke. His grammar of representation makes provisions for the kinds of problems and pitfalls inherent in his project while the others neglect to acknowledge them. Instead, many of these writers arrogantly set out to 'demystify India'. They believe that somehow they have the ability and the authority to make such an intervention, but what happens, instead, is an eroticization of difference, in which India gets remystified instead of demystified. The complex, heterogeneous and multifaceted identities are collapsed into simplistic, homogenized, stereotypes. Armed with 'superior cognition' and representational power, such writers unleash an epistemic violence on their 'dumb' (not knowing English) subjects, thereby dehumanizing them. Narayan, on the other hand, though he writes in English, vernacularizes it to suggest the kind of bilingualism that can accommodate the reality of the marginalized subaltern, who is both economically and linguistically underprivileged (he is deprived of English), and yet manages not to rob him of his dignity.

Ultimately, however, the story in question suggests that where translation is impossible what often happens is triage, (mis)appropriation, even theft; however, where translation is predominant, what ensues is negotiation, if not exchange. I have tried to argue that Narayan's fiction shows his own way of being Indian English. This way of being is not entirely English or Anglicized, even if it is authentically Indian. Narayan naturalizes India into English more than trying to nativize English to the Indian context. But his being Indian English is a sort of interbeing, between and across two or more languages or rather using the one language of his primary expression, English, in such a manner that India, sometimes non-English India, is cross-hatched into this language. Such an interpellation makes Narayan's language, deceptively simple though it may be, swell up as if it were pregnant with an Indian reality that lies just beneath its verbal texture and surface. Narayan's English, then, always hides or suggests more than it reveals. It is what is hidden or suggested that moves and touches us, which brings us back to his apparently but actually much more complex world. This world refreshes us not because it is accurate to our realities in India but because it seems to be an adequate representation of it. It is adequate because it seems to capture the essential 'truth' about India. Narayan's India is not necessarily 'translated' into English, but it is represented through a process

of mediation which we might call interlinguistic or bicultural. It is not straight translation; because if it were, back-translation would work perfectly, but it doesn't. So it's not translation but an infusion or a resonance or equivalence.

This interlingualism uses a variety of devices including translation, but more properly involves an invention of a new kind of English, Narayan-English or 'Narayanese', which, with its pared down vocabulary, largely simple syntax, and basic structure manages to stand for English, for Indian (that is, Tamil, Kannada or any other Indian language), or for a neutral narrative voice which subsumes these mediums of expression.

## III

I would now like, very briefly, to turn to two other questions that have preoccupied me with regard to Narayan's work. The first of these is Naipaul's assessment in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) of Narayan as a Hindu writer who does not understand the modern world:

> I did not lose my admiration for Narayan but I felt that his comedy and irony were a part of a Hindu response to the world, a response that I could no longer share. And it has [...] become clear to me [...] that for all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious books, at times religious fables, and intensely Hindu (12–13).

I have dealt with this topic in an earlier paper on *The Guide*, (1958) but it might be fruitful to return to it briefly. Strangely enough, I think Naipaul was not wholly wrong. Narayan is, in the ultimate analysis, a 'Hindu' writer. But this does not mean what Naipaul thinks it does. It is not that Narayan does not understand the modern world or that he is uncomfortable in it. Only a post-secular criticism can come to terms with the complexity of Narayan's work for which wholly secular readings, such that Naipaul tries to foist on Narayan, do not suffice. The difficulty is with Naipaul's lens, which is limited and therefore distorting. The 'religious secularism' of Narayan is not possible to comprehend for Naipaul though Graham Greene not only had no difficulties relating, but probably felt an uncanny affinity, to it.

Naipaul does not seem to see that Narayan's world is not static or without flux, however slow or 'timeless' it may appear to be. The story of *The Guide*, if read carefully, is actually a narrative of modernity, symbolized by the railway, encroaching and penetrating a sylvan world. Nalini comes to Malgudi on the train along with Marco. The forces of the outside world invade Raju's simple world, propelling him into a different kind of role than the tourist guide that

the railways had made him. Each of his stories similarly depicts the passage of time, the tension between tradition and modernity, between forces of containment and of change. But even if the world changes, the parameters of reading it, the moral compass, if you will, does not. This moral compass is more Hindu than secular. In change, which is both inevitable and irresistible, Narayan finds a deeper principle of continuity, which makes the play of perennial (*sanatan*) values once again evident. That is why, I believe that Narayan is a greater writer than he appears at first. Behind the facile façade of timeless India lies great meaning and value, which pushes itself to the surface, now and again, reminding us that the pool of his talent, though limpid, is quite deep, drawing us as much by its depth as by its clarity.

Naipaul won the Nobel Prize for literature while Narayan remained a modestly successful author, known abroad but largely provincial. Vis-à-vis the dominant culture whose member so proudly is Naipaul as Sir Vidia, Narayan certainly belongs to 'another canon'. And when it comes to Narayan's own oeuvre, 'A Horse and Two Goats' is often read as a charming but minor work. But if we pay attention we realize that this text is not only central to Narayan's fictional enterprise, but manages to highlight a key difference between Narayan and Naipaul. While the former uses his English in an evocative way so as to portray a multilingualism and cross-cultural misunderstanding, in Naipaul the misunderstanding is permanently internalized precisely because he is condemned to monolingualism. Traveling around the world, encountering cultures and peoples whose languages he cannot understand, Naipaul resorts to prejudiced and opinionated judgment, often based on incorrect translation or half-understanding. Nowhere does he stop to ask if his not knowing the local language is a serious handicap, limiting his capacity to write about the society in question. Instead, he assumes that he has not only understood these strange cultures and societies, but that he does so even *better* than the local. The latter, for Naipaul, are constitutively incapable of self-understanding because they have fallen prey to the illusions and falsehood which he, with his superior mental equipment, makes it his mission to expose. In effect, Naipaul turns his ignorance into his greatest virtue – not knowing a culture, not knowing its language actually makes him understand others better than they understand themselves. That is why Naipaul is the most assertive, the most judgmental writers of our times. In contrast, Narayan, living quietly for years in a non-descript neighbourhood in a small city like Mysore writes book after book weaving a complex tapestry of a profound understanding of his society, without being assertive in the least.

Another canon, it would seem, is at times more insightful that the official one.

# 5

# THE TALE OF AN INDIAN EDUCATION: *The Silver Pilgrimage:*

First published in 1961, M Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage,* though not a well-known novel, does have a selected readership.[1] Its author, who was born in 1907 and who died a few years back, was a judge in the Madras High Court, a connoisseur of music, and a recognized figure in the intellectual circles of Madras. He was not a writer by profession and *The Silver Pilgrimage* is his only novel. His father was the distinguished English and Tamil writer, A Madhavaiah, the author of books like *Thillai Govindan* (1908) and *Clarinda* (1915).[2] *The Silver Pilgrimage* itself is a unique novel. Its narrative technique is a mixture of fable and fantasy, somewhat reminiscent of another neglected novelist, Sudhin Ghose. It differs from Ghose's works in that it is set in the mythical past of medieval India, though the narrative voice is thoroughly modern. The overall effect, as Harvey Breit points out in his preface, is magical:

> Such is the exotic power of this small novel, *The Silver Pilgrimage*. One enters the supernatural world in the most natural way, embarking on a pilgrimage as a twentieth-century western man to return partially clothed in the raiments of an ancient India. Call it a novel, a tapestry, a pageant, a tour de force… (5). *The Silver Pilgrimage* is both comic revelatory, and something beyond. It has its own luminosity; it is magic (7).

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[1] All quotations from the book are from this edition published by Criterion Books of New York. A reprint under the Mayflower Paperbacks, imprint of Arnold Heinemann (New Delhi) appeared in 1975. More recently this book was reissued by both Penguin India and by Rupa & Co., New Delhi.

[2] I was told this by Professor S Viswanathan and Dr M G Ramanan, both natives of Madras, who knew about the judge's keen interest in Carnatic music. Subsequently, I met the author's son, A Madhavan, who after a distinguished career in the Indian Foreign Service, settled down in Mysore.

No wonder, therefore, the novel has been favourably noticed by eminent scholars such as K R Srinivasa Iyengar (486–9) and C D Narasimhiah (see George, 1302).

Tracing the impact of Indian thought in *The Silver Pilgrimage* is a challenging task because there is so much of it. One of the main purpose of the book is to evoke an Indian, even Hindu Tamil ethos, as is evident from the author's setting it, both temporally and geographically, in medieval, Southern India. The very first sentence of the novel makes it clear:

> In the old days, before this part of the world was tainted with pale faces, motor cars and smoke-belching factories, before damp newsprint had corrupted the minds of men, a king ruled in Lanka (Ceylon) whose name is Simha (15).

Later, on in Chapter VII, from the story of the merchant, 'Sojourner in a Strange Land', it is possible to date the events in the book more precisely. The merchant, in his travels, has visited England and even seen the plays of Shakespeare (86–100). Because he is in his forties (86), it is possible to guess that the book primarily in Sri Lanka and South India, the author avoids dealing much with Muslim North India. As Breit, quoting the author, points out:

> What the novel does is to give expression to a culture 'in which religion, in its most intrinsic sense, pervaded every activity in life, and tinged every experience or feeling, so that all events were seen as symbols.' (8)

Hence religion or a certain religious worldview forms the hub of Indian thought in the novel, its various spokes being music, painting, sculpture, cooking, lovemaking, kingship, medicine, mythology, philosophy etc. In other words, all these facets of Indian thought find expression in the book.

In tracing these influences, I want to begin with the narrative technique of the book. The novel begins with a Melvillesque Prolegomena, an assortment of twenty quotations from diverse sources, both western and eastern, which not only set the tone of what is to follow, but also whet our appetite for it. Fourteen chapters of the novel proper succeed the Prolegomena; this, in brief, is the structure of the book.

The basic plot, too, is disarmingly simple. Prince Jayasurya of Lanka, is afflicted by a strange disease: he is completely self-absorbed, indifferent to everything, and capricious. As a cure, sage Agastya asks him to undertake a pilgrimage to Kashi. Accompanied by his faithful friend, Tilaka, he sets out. They experience many adventures and misadventures on the way. During all these, the prince marries Valli, the daughter of a Marava chieftain, who has

imprisoned his friend. Accompanied by a *purohit*, who arranges their escape, they move on towards Kashi. On the way they encounter several interesting characters including a *Brahmarakshas*. Finally, they reach Kashi. Here the prince meets a saint whose words bring about a silent transformation in him. They return to Lanka. On the way, Valli dies. On coming back, the changed Jayasurya ascends the throne, his father having died in his absence. He proves a good and wise ruler. The novel ends, as old-fashioned tales do, with a moral: 'Life is dear and supportable at all points, however great the anguish or mean the situation, for everywhere it is in tension' (159).

From this description, it is clear that the novel has an educative structure. The device of the pilgrimage is a convenient method of exposing the prince to the reality and variety of life, from which he has been completely sheltered in the palace. Sage Agastya's counsel seems to have precisely such an intention: to initiate the prince to the Book of Life. Obviously, Jayasurya's reading and education have not resulted in his becoming wise. Not only does the pilgrimage show the prince the varieties of experience, it also brings him in contact with characters who discourse with him on diverse subjects. Examples include a conversation with the *purohit* and Tilaka (Ch. VI), encounter with *Brahmarakshas* (Ch. V), conversations with a Tamil poet, a tax collector and King Pandyan (Ch. VI), argument on *jivanmukti* and the merchant's story (Ch. VII), meetings with the doctor, the astrologer and the dancer (Ch VIII), the Kalinga story-teller's discourse (Ch. IV), meeting the saint of Kashi (Ch. X) and finally the dialogue, with the spirit of the dead Valli (Ch. XIII). Hence the education proceeds not merely through events, but through the discourses of a variety of characters encountered and through discussions that follow.

It is important to note, however, that this novel of education is very different from a *Bildungsroman,* its modern Western counterpart. The latter is set in a realistic mode and usually recounts the growth of its protagonist from adolescence to maturity. Its emphasis is on the development of the ego and its manner of presentation is secular. Similarly, it would not do to consider *The Silver Pilgrimage* as picaresque, though it has an episodic plot and concerns the adventures of the prince. Unlike the picaresque, the intent of the novel is not satirical, nor are its main characters the vehicles of the author's observations of society. Instead, *The Silver Pilgrimage* is influenced by the Indian fictional tradition and is best understood in such a context. Like the *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*, *The Silver Pilgrimage* is also a work of *niti-shastra* or a book which teaches, to use Arthur W Ryder's words, 'the wise conduct of life' (4). The *Panchatantra* was created by Vishnusharman to educate the three dim-witted sons of King Amarshakti. Similarly, the *Hitopadesha* was compiled by Narayanachandra for the education of the son of Sudarshana, the King of Pataliputra (see *Comparative Indian Literature,* Vol. 1, 121–2). The whole purpose

of Agastya's injunction to send the prince on the pilgrimage is similar, so that he may learn how to live correctly. Thus, the pilgrimage is to Jayasurya as the stories are to the princes in *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha.* And as in these two works, in *The Silver Pilgrimage* too there are stories, dialogues, conversations, discourses and so on, set within the main narrative. Being a work of *niti-shastra,* the novel is concerned with how to live a virtuous and happy life while being in the world; it is not a work which teaches how to renounce the world. What Ryder says of the *Panchatantra* applies to this novel as well:

> *niti* presupposes that one has considered, and rejected, the possibility of living as a saint. It can be practised only by a social being, and represents an admirable attempt to answer the insistent question how to win the utmost possible joy from life in the world of men (4–5).

*The Silver Pilgrimage* belongs to the Indian narrative tradition in another important way: it stresses the theme of exile. In this it recalls the exiles of Rama, Sita and Laskhmana in the Ramayana and that of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. It also brings to mind the story of Nala and Damayanti from Mahabharata (see Coomaraswamy and Nivedita in Works Cited).

The narrative technique is only one area, albeit an important one, where the novel shows an influence of Indian thought. Other areas can be schematized as follows:

Topic and Page Numbers :

Statecraft: 16; Medicine: 19–20; 23–6; 104–7; 116–22; Philosophy: 33–9; 48–9; 54–8; Poetry: 62–8; Economics: 68–72; Music: 74–9; Mysticism: 80–5; 130–3; Dramaturgy: 86–100; Erotics: 112–5; Dance: 113–4; 135–7; Cookery: 142–5; The occult: 152–5.

These topics can be grouped into related areas such as medicine and astrology; philosophy, mysticism and the occult; economics and statecraft; poetry, dramaturgy, dance and music; erotics and cookery. It is not possible to locate the exact sources for all of these because, obviously the author resorts to invention. Yet all these topics derive from traditions of Indian thought. For example, the prescriptions and diagnosis of the physicians surely owe something to Ayurveda and other indigenous forms of medicine. 'Ambergris, musk, steel fittings, saffron, *basmas* of copper, gold, silver, herbs' (19), the feeling of the pulse (24), and the diagnosis: 'This sort of phlegm must be checked, but only in those courses. Bile must be warmed and encouraged, but its flow must be even, within the prescribed volume' (25). Such a medical verdict smacks of

Ayurvedic practice mingled with some convincing charlatanism.[3] Similarly, discussions on poetry, drama, dance and music in the book owe a lot to treatises on Indian aesthetics like Bharata's *Natyashastra;* economics and statecraft to work on *Arthashastra;* erotics to works on *kamashastras*; philosophy, mysticism and occult to works on Vedanta, Yoga, cosmology and the *Puranas* and so on. In fact, a number of these texts and systems are actually cited in the book. For example: *Puranas* (19, 31), *Arthashastra* (31, 68); *ManuSmriti,* (Yagnavalkya's commentary) (44); Patanjali's *Yoga-sutras* (49, 83); Charvaka philosophy (48); Kamashastra (60); *Katha Upanishad* (70) *Manikkavasagar* (80); *Hitopadesha* (92); Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttararama Charita* (99); Panini (99); Ayurveda (105) and Purva Mimamsa (156).[4] Allusions to these works and authors clearly give an idea of their impact on the novel.

My main concern here is not, however, with the influence of Indian thought on all the above topics and areas in the novel. Such an exercise would not only require a great deal of space, but it might not be very useful. My aim is to examine what the pilgrimage does to Jayasurya and if this can be understood in terms of Indian philosophy. A useful way to measuring the change in Jayasurya's character is to compare what he is at the beginning with what he becomes at the end of the novel. The main problem with the prince at the beginning is that 'he loved [...] none but himself' (17). Even when his beautiful Yasodhara dies, he feels nothing (19). The court physician thinks: 'Quite heartless young men who were also entirely healthy, were [...] not sick, but devils' (22). Jayasurya, true enough, has no concern for anyone. He calls his father 'that old dotard' (21), the scriptures 'sawdust', and the *Bhagavad Gita,* after chapter two, 'the creation of a mediocre and dyspeptic purohit who had made a hotchpotch of the treatises of two or three systems' (29). Thus, it is not surprising that the sage Agastya confirms the court-physician's diagnosis:

> His illness is not mild [...] It is the dreaded disease that tyrants suffer from. Unpurged, the toxins will corrupt his heart and derive him to the grossest of delusions of a perfect environment for body and mind, like the gold setting of a diamond. His laughter and hardness will grow, become as sword blade (38).

Hence, the prince is completely unfeeling, insensitive and callous. His primary concern is with the gratification of his bodily needs. Being young, handsome, accomplished, powerful and rich, he has the means to indulge himself. His

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[3] See Winternitz, Vol. II, Sec. V, 626–41 for a descriptive list of some of the texts of Ayurveda.

[4] See Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature,* de Berry, *Sources of India Tradition* and Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy* on some of the texts and traditions mentioned.

power and privilege have insulated him from the suffering of fellow human beings, making him aloof to the vicissitudes of life. It is to cure this malady that he is sent on the pilgrimage.

He returns, surely enough, a changed man. When Valli is stricken with cholera, 'he attended upon his wife with a devotion which came as a revelation even to Tilaka' (148). A marked contrast, indeed, to his reaction at the illness and death to Yashodhara. He becomes 'ever afterward gentler toward women' (149). He is so affected by her death that he begins to waste away, tortured by a desire to understand, like Nachiketa, Death itself (152). He is somewhat satisfied only after he talks to her spirit through a medium (155–6). The prince, upon the death of his father, goes on to become a benevolent and efficient ruler, greatly improving the health care system in his kingdom (149–50).

The change in the prince begins early on in the journey itself when, for what seems for the first time, he begins to reflect on his state:

> How strange is destiny! How little did I guess that I would be here with Tilaka, a wayfarer not owing a gold *mohur,* married to a Marava girl, and dragging her along a pilgrimage to Kashi, of all places! It is passing strange! (47)

Thus, a realization of the unpredictability and uncertainty of life begins to dawn on the prince. This is the first time that he has started looking within, showing concern with inner instead outer reality. But the prince's introspection matures only when he reaches Kashi:

> Further, the prince asked himself, whence all this? Now that he was at the end of the pilgrimage, what was its meaning, and why was it necessary at all? [...] The stupidity of life struck him, as hailstones on the face of the traveller caught in a storm (129).

As a last resort, at Tilaka's behest, the prince agrees to meet the famous saint of Kashi:

> His eyes had piercing brightness and his face a constant beatitude, itself a testimony to some rare inner peace that he had attained (130).

It is this encounter with the saint that changes the prince, imperceptibly but surely:

> There can be no doubt that, in consequence of this interview, the prince started upon his return journey in greatly altered mood, with a hope and

> cheer that he was far from feeling previously, since he had set out upon the pilgrimage to Kashi. Some casement of the spirit was thrown open, some intuition awakened. The saint of Kashi certainly accomplished this much (130).

This is then the crux of *The Silver Pilgrimage*: the change and the manner of the change, wrought on the prince by the journey.

How is this central movement to be interpreted? I believe the key to its understanding lies in certain well-known concepts of Indian philosophy. The first is the notion of the stages on the path of enlightenment and, second, correspondingly, is the notion of the *gunas*. In one view of the theory, there are the following four stages on the path to enlightenment *baddha* (bound or ignorant); *mumuksha* (desirous of finding truth); v*iveka* and *vairagya* (discrimination and dispassion); and finally *mukti* (freedom and enlightenment). At the beginning of the book the prince is bound or ignorant. He identifies himself with his body and is preoccupied in sense pleasures. Once he sets on the journey, he is exposed to numerous hardships which stress the transience and impermanence of earthly existence. He then becomes a *mumuksha* or one who seeks truth. The interview with the saint in Kashi and the death of Valli, lead him to discrimination and detachment. In this manner he comes back to be a good king. Whether he attains to the fourth stage, *mukti,* is not clear, but it is assumed that he is on his way. Similarly, it can be argued that at the beginning of the book the prince is overwhelmed by *tamas* (darkness or ignorance), and *rajas* (egoistical activity), and he gradually moves towards *sattwa* or purity and dispassion as he goes through the pilgrimage.[5]

As to the dialogue with the saint himself, it too can be understood in terms of Indian philosophy and tradition. In his method of teaching, this saint seems to have been derived partly from Sri Ramana Maharshi:

> Another peculiarity of his was that no explanations were necessary from the sufferer, neither fact nor confession of mood [sic]. The saint merely gave a long, leisurely look and, in some occult manner, perceived the heart of the tragedy or pain before him (130).

Sri Ramana Maharshi, too, was well known for his silent teaching; it is said that there was ineffable peace in his presence such that in it all the doubts of the devotee were satisfied (see *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*). Sri Ramana Maharshi is himself a type of the first guru, the silent Dakshinamurti mentioned

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[5] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* for stages of *sadhana;* also see Brahma, *Philosophy of Hindu Sadhana,* and Dasgupta, op. cit.

in the Upanishads. The content of his teaching, also seems to be strongly akin to that of J Krishnamurti in that this saint is 'ignorant of Hindu Metaphysics'. (However, this is also true of many men, like Sai Baba of Shridi, who had no formal education). Moreover, his doctrine of living in the present bears a resemblance to Krishnamurti's teaching:

> Saint. Well, in those moments which were then the present to you, did you torment yourself with the future, or yearnings for the past?
> Prince. No, because I was happy then, and entirely at peace. I lived intensely in the job of those moments (131).

Again, his stress on the naturalness with which peace follows when the seeker wants it intensely is akin to Krishnamurti's stress on the urgency that is needed to produce change:

> Saint. When you want something so intensely, and that is as natural as love between a boy and girl, do you trouble yourself with wisdom of elders and the Vedas, with a method of attainment? When you want peace with your whole being, and even the effort is realised as intolerable agony, there will be peace (132).

It must be acknowledged that a stress on sincerity and single mindedness of purpose in the *sadhaka* was commonly emphasized. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna himself was ready to commit suicide if his *ishta devata*, Goddess Kali, did not reveal Herself to him. Another area in which the saint's teaching resembles Krishnamurti's is in his distinction between the world and the thing, between symbol and reality:

> *Saint.* But what I mean is very simple: It is truth which is plain and immediate. The atman is a word, is it not?
> *Tilaka.* Yes,
> *Saint*. And the word is symbol for thought or concept?
> *Tilaka.* Yes,
> *Saint*. But the concept again is a verbalisation. Without the word 'atman,' how can there be an idea of the atman? Surely the idea is a word, filtered from words. But that which is real can neither be a word nor a thought.[6]

This distinction between the mere word and the thing itself is important in the novel because it stressed the gap between mere intellectual understanding

[6] For an introduction to the teaching of Krishnamurti see Vas and Lutyens in Works Cited.

and true comprehension, between book learning and real experience. It is easily remembered that the prince himself was well-versed in books at the beginning of the novel, and yet ignorant. Equally significant is the fact that the long discussion on *Jivanmukti* in Chapter VII between the Shaivite guru and the Vaishnava preceptor has had little effect on the trio, while this encounter with the saint has influenced them so much. This is because the former discussion was merely pedantic and scholastic where each debater was locked into his own particular prejudices. The saint on the other hand embodies the very thing – *mukti* or freedom that the gurus are debating about. Whereas, *Jivanmukti* is merely a concept or an idea to them, the saint is a living exemplar of it. He is an actual witness to that state by being it. Without such *sakshatkara* the *sadhaka* cannot be truly transformed. The saint's earlier distinction between one's true state and its modification by thought recalls the yoga philosophy of Patanjali and the ideal of equanimity as enunciated in the *Gita*:

> *Saint,* (smiling). So you see, events do not prevent you from being peaceful and joyous. It is flitting thought about them, which prevents peace. When the mind is intensely focussed in the present, when it is not separate from the event but is even itself, there is, spontaneously, both peace and happiness.

In other words, when the modifications of the thoughts subside, then the mind gets submerged into its true state, which is *satchitananda* or Truth–Consciousness–Bliss. In effect, the saint asks the prince, not to let thoughts, whether pleasurable or painful, attach themselves to events and actions, therefore causing happiness or unhappiness. When such thoughts cease, there is no disturbing the continuum of awareness that is consciousness. The portrayal of the saint, therefore, stresses actual experience over learning in keeping with the experiential basis of the Indian religious outlook.

When viewed in this light, the pilgrimage becomes as much an internal journey as an external one. Kashi is within us, and it is to that ultimate destination that we journey. The obstacles on the way are the *upadhis* or hindrances that we must overcome. The novel, hence, is the account of a spiritual odyssey or *sadhana*. It gives expression to an ethos where such trial is valued and considered necessary. As C V Venugopal, in one of the few critical essays on the novel, has noted:

> To be born into this culture, is in itself a sound religious discipline enabling one to live a life fully and wholly yet sufficiently detached not to be unduly affected by the vagaries of fortune… (256).

Through the trial of Jayasurya, we too participate in this religious discipline. After all, it is traditionally believed that listening to the scriptures, reading or reciting them is itself meritorious. Thus the moral of the story, stated first by Sage Agastya (36), and repeated by Tilaka in the end: 'Life is dear and supportable at all points, however great the anguish or mean the situation, for everywhere it is in tension'(159), is equally directed at us, the readers, as it is at the prince, Tilaka, the *purohit* and the actors. Yet, the book ends on a light, airy, and very mundane note, with the *purohit* hastening away from the serious moral to the inviting feast of *aviyal* and *pappadams.* We are not to forget that this is a Silver Pilgrimage, not a Golden one. As the author tells us in the Prolegomena, whereas the Golden Pilgrimage which is to Mount Kailas, bestows *moksha* or a complete 'cessation from rebirths', the Silver Pilgrimage only 'reduces future births to a single digit, from a reckoning of hundreds' (8). There is still much of earthly existence that is left in this one life to be enjoyed and cherished.

Thus, it is that Jayasurya probably does not go beyond *vairagya* to *mukti* or beyond *sattwa* or *turiya*. Similarly, the book may not confer the final emancipation on its readers, but then to have future births reduced to a single digit is not a small achievement.

# 6

# 'CLIP JOINT': Modernity and Its Discontents

## I

'Clip Joint' is considered as one of U R Anantha Murthy's most significant short stories.[1] Though better known for novels like *Samskara,* (1965), Awasthe (1966) and *Bharatipura* (1973) Anantha Murthy's short stories, some of which are quite substantial in length, are a very important part of his oeuvre. Not only is Anantha Murthy one of India's greatest living novelists, one proof of which is that he has won every major literary award in India including the Jnanpith, but what is perhaps equally important is that he too, like other major Indian writers, has grappled long and hard with the problem of India's response to the West. What is Indian modernity? How is it different from Western modernity? Which aspects of tradition are worth retaining and which must be discarded? These and other such questions, appearing as they do in text after text, constituting the thematic burden of his works. And they are explored more intensely in the short stories as they are in the longer novels. That is why it is important to look at a work such as 'Clip Joint'. Though originally written in Kannada, it is not only set in England where Anantha Murthy lived as a postgraduate student, but is now available in an English translation. It thus becomes a part of the larger Indian English corpus and belongs to a national or transnational readership, not just to a local or regional one. Hence, it becomes significant to the kind of inquiry into modern Indian textuality that we have been conducting here.

Rather than approaching 'Clip Joint' directly, I would like to prepare the ground for my response to it by narrating a memorable encounter with Raja

1. 'Originally appearing in the Kannada collection Mouni (1973), the story was first published in English translation in *Indian Literature* in 1997, and in another, improved translation by Narayana Hegde in 1999.'

Rao, the great Indian English novelist. I am reproducing the relevant portions of my journal to convey a sense of this meeting.

24 March 1997. Evening. Raja Rao is reclining on his bed, while I sit by his side on the floor. He is nearly ninety years old, but still very sprightly and alive. We have just come back from the symposium held in his honour by the Centre for Asian Studies, University of Texas. It has been a long, busy day, with several papers and presentations, one of which is the award of the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship to Raja Rao by the President of the Akademi, U R Anantha Murthy. Raja Rao has patiently sat through it all. I am to leave early next morning, so this is my last opportunity to talk to Raja Rao. I thought he would be tired, but he fixes me with his keen and alert gaze. I know that he is willing to have a conversation.

After talking about the symposium for a while, he suddenly asks, 'Who are some of the more interesting writers of India these days?'

I mention a few names, one of which was U R Anantha Murthy.

Raja Rao: 'He writes in Kannada, but I haven't read him yet. Tell me, what does he write about? What is he really trying to say?'

I feel uncomfortable, almost cornered. The question is very direct, if not blunt. I feel disconcerted. Anantha Murthy is a writer I admire, besides being a friend. I would have preferred to take refuge behind vague generalizations or platitudes rather than risk a direct value judgement. But that escape-route is not available with Raja Rao.

So, I take a deep breath and plunge ahead.

'Anantha Murthy's fiction is about the tussle between tradition and modernity – or rather between traditions and modernities. What is interesting is that he seems to be on the side of modernity, but it is only after a careful reading that one realizes that neither wins. In fact, one might even argue that in the later works, there is a move towards respecting a certain kind of tradition more than the available modernities…'

Raja Rao seems interested. His lips are set, his eyes sparkle. At length he says, 'Very correct. Modernity cannot satisfy us'.

'But', I add, 'most of Anantha Murthy's energies have gone into documenting the corruptions of tradition. Look at *Samskara*, his most celebrated work. Tradition is represented by Praneshacharya's crippled wife, who can satisfy him neither physically or intellectually. Praneshacharya, on the other hand, is a transitional being. He begins as a traditionalist, but discovers that tradition is incapable of handling the problems caused by modernity – the rotting corpse of Naranappa. It is only after his second birth through a sexual encounter with Naranappa's low-caste mistress, Chandri, that he finds the strength to face the harsh realities of the world outside the fenced-off *agrahara*.'

'What happens at the end of the novel? Where does Anantha Murthy leave you?'

'Well, that's where I have a problem with him. He leaves you with an ambiguity, an uncertainty. It's a sort of existentialist dilemma. The real world outside the *agrahara*, too, is in a real mess. Praneshacharya cannot find any lasting happiness there. He returns to his village, sadder, more puzzled. Life, it would seem, has no inherent purpose or meaning; how, then, is one to make one's existence meaningful? This, I think is the central question in *Samskara*.'

I can almost guess what Raja Rao is thinking. The gaping hole is the absence of the Guru. Without the Guru, how could life be meaningful? I quickly add, 'In one of his short stories, however, there is a village simpleton, who with a mere touch banishes the doubts of his childhood friend, who is visiting the village after spending most of his life in cities. In this story, the simpleton, if I remember correctly, wants to wrestle with a tiger. The modern city bred man is that tiger, whom he wrestles and overcomes.'

It was getting late. I had to leave. My conversation with Raja Rao was left incomplete. Quite by chance, I was invited by the new editor of *Indian Literature* to respond to Anantha Murthy's story. I took it as a good omen.[2] Perhaps, I would be able to finish what I was trying to say to Raja Rao.

## II

I was told by a person whose opinion I respected that 'Clip Joint' was Anantha Murthy's best story. Frankly, my first reading of it was not quite so exhilarating. That is because I initially read the story in not so good a translation. Once again, I was confronted with a fundamental problem. Why is Indian literature not taken seriously worldwide? Why are lesser European or Latin American authors lauded, feted, read and analyzed more than our much more substantial talents? One obvious reason is that we have not yet succeeded in producing first-rate translations of our native literatures. A crucial question that keeps recurring is if the translation should be in Indian English or in international English. (I am assuming that the overlap between the two is relatively small.) Indian English translations, invariably, end up making the original sound bad – rustic, inferior, unfinished, clumsy, inadequate and so on. Hence the consistent policy of some publishing houses to encourage British or American translators to render our authors into English. But these often end up distorting meaning, imposing the values, target language and its culture on the original, violating it in an imperialistic sort of manner. What is the way out? Neither of the two

[2] An earlier version was published as 'Clip Joint' by U R Anantha Murthy – A Response' in *Indian Literature*, 179 (May–June 1997): 124–35.

options mentioned will do. What we need is either extremely competent and contemporary translations by Indians or equally sensitive and non-violative translations by foreigners. Both are difficult and rare to find. In the meanwhile, Indian writing must continue to bear the indignities of poor translations.

Luckily, Anantha Murthy's stories now have a very fine and competent translator in Narayan Hegde. It is to his edition of *Stallion of the Sun and Other Stories* (1909) that I shall refer to here. Yet, even though it is well translated, a story like 'Clip Joint' poses some special problems which need to be mentioned briefly. The story is set in London. Most of it is a conversation between two friends, the narrator who is Indian, and his upper-middle class English friend, Stewart. Anantha Murthy, who lived in Britain for several years, obviously conceived the story as being set in England, with its dialogues in English. Then he rendered the latter into Kannada, which by all accounts was very effective. But while Anantha Murthy manages to convey the flavour of an English conversation in Kannada, when the conversation is translated back into English, it comes under severe stress. What is funny is that it does not sound like native English at all! So while Stewart might well sound and feel like an Englishman in the Kannada original, he ends up sounding somewhat unenglish in the translation, closer to an Indian provincial attempting to speak English than a 'real' Englishman. At least such was the impression in the earlier translation which I read. It is not just that the idioms were wrong here and there, but that the whole flavour of a well-bred Englishman which Anantha Murthy is trying to convey was missing. Luckily, in Hegde's translation, the problem is alleviated considerably, though not entirely. Here, the difficulty is that both the Indian narrator and Stewart speak a language that is almost indistinguishable from one another. Clearly, that would be untenable. The original would have tried to equip them with slightly different languages so as to distinguish them, especially their cultural and class differences, from one another. In the English translation, this ethnic, social, even racial difference is all but erased, thus flattening the depth and complexity of the original text.

## III

'Clip Joint' begins with the protagonist, Keshav, contemplating suicide. As he waits with his friend, Stewart, to get onto a train in the London underground, he wonders, 'What if I jumped...?' (33). This, the story goes on to show, is not a stray thought, but a real death wish born of an inner emptiness.

What is Keshav's problem? As he himself puts it, 'Here I am, thirty two years old and greying, the excitement and wonder of youth have left me. And I've never even held a girl's hand' (35). If one were to simplify his difficulty, it would be sexual deprivation, but itself may be read as symptomatic of a larger

sense of dissatisfaction with life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Keshav's manner of regarding almost every woman he encounters in the novel is decidedly libidinal. He almost salivates when he watches a couple necking. Later, in the nightclub, he is most aroused by the sight of female flesh being gradually exposed. Not only is the story propelled by Keshav's repression, but it also reaches its climax in his realization that flesh, after all, is just flesh. Nothing more. He is smitten by the illusion of sex and his final disillusionment also concerns sex. So sexual frustration is certainly a key theme in the story.

But, obviously, many more things get superadded to this basic human need and drive. Keshav is not just deprived sexually, but in many other material and emotional ways as well. He has been burdened by responsibility from an early age; he has to look after his aging mother and several siblings. Of these, his younger brother Maadhu, is his opposite. Maadhu is selfish, irresponsible and incompetent. There are several sisters to be married. We are clearly informed that Keshav is saving out of his meagre scholarship so that he can send money home through unofficial channels. Even while he was growing up, Keshav has had to suffer the indignity of living in a charitable hostel. On top of that, he has had to bear the humiliation of granting sexual favours to the head of the hostel in exchange of the boarding and lodging. All these facts weigh heavily on Keshav's mind.

The first part of the story, then, not only fills us in on Keshav's background, but helps focus his helplessness and despair. Clearly, Keshav is depressed. This is instantly clear from the nature of the conversations that he has with Stewart. Interestingly, Stewart takes the position that a traditional country like India, with its certitudes and guarantees, offers more than the modern England. The latter is a decaying society, rotting from within. It is besieged by consumerism and the commodification of human beings. Here, old people are abandoned by their children and left to die of loneliness and neglect. In contrast, Keshav has seen first-hand, how the vaunted traditions of India are equally hollow and decadent. When the story begins, both points of view get expressed in the debate between purposefulness and purposelessness. While Stewart says that to have a purpose is desirable, Keshav demonstrates his own inner bleakness and confusion by saying, 'I don't believe in having any purpose. Nor do I believe in purposelessness…' (36).

It is this state of uncertainty and wretchedness with which Keshav begins his journey. His life offers him little to affirm, to celebrate. Instead, it seems meaningless and wearisome. That is why the thought of suicide is not just a passing whim. But, if this is his state at the beginning, what does Keshav learn at the end of the story? What does he gain? It would appear that the knowledge he gains is unconstructive, like the negative results of an experiment. He had sought to lose himself in the pleasures of the flesh, but realizes that these are

false and distasteful too. How does he come to such a conclusion? He sees the alluring stripper for what she is: a greedy professional who is not even sexually attractive. This then is the sum and substance of his knowledge.

If the story is indeed as I have described it, what is its claim to special attention? I think we need to look at this story seriously because it may be read as an extended allegory about the modern condition. The whole episode at the strip joint, then, must be viewed metaphorically and symbolically. If so, then what the story suggests is that the modern West has a definite attraction for a traditional person or society. It promises freedom, material comforts and unlimited sensual pleasures – for a price, of course. It would appear that such a society has the wherewithal to satisfy and fulfil those who have emerged from the ruins of a traditional society.

Keshav, then, is not just an individual, but a whole culture, country or way of life. Having undergone so much privation, he now seeks some pleasures, some freedom to experiment, some physical and emotional solace. The stripper at the nightclub represents an aspect of the modern West. She seems to offer so much – love, satisfaction, sexual pleasure, beauty and so on. She seems eager to please, quite compliant. But as she strips herself naked, shedding layer after layer of clothing, she is gradually revealed to be nothing more than a cheat, a prostitute. Not only is she a victim herself, but also an exploiter. Having sold herself to the system, she methodically preys on all of those whom she can beguile and entrap. In short, the modern condition promises so much, but actually delivers so little. It is, ultimately, a clip joint, where one ends up getting ripped off.

What about Stewart? Stewart is the best that the West can make of its human material. He is, to Anantha Murthy's contrast, a 'decent man' versus the 'saint' that the traditional society reveres. As Stewart himself puts it, 'It was India that first told the world that self-knowledge is the ultimate goal of life' (52). Keshav quickly counters, 'True. But self-knowledge is possible only for saints and mystics. We Indians don't have the self-criticism which is essential for a civilized life' (52). That is how the debate goes on through the text. Keshav is constantly trying to impress upon Stewart the special quality of his suffering or degradation, but at every step what he discovers is that Stewart has seen worse. Nothing fazes Stewart. No confession, no revelation that he offers is able to elicit the kind of endorsement or capitulation that Keshav seeks. In the end, it is Keshav who is exposed as the naive man, who believes that his suffering is special but only learns that it is not unlike that of others.

In other words, what I am trying to suggest is that the decay and degradation of tradition which Keshav has experienced is not, perhaps, sufficient ground for his frustration or despair. That is why the ground that Indian modernists tread is so weak. The reasons for their angst are

insufficient; the objective conditions do not necessarily warrant the subjective state that they are in.

I believe, and this goes to his credit, that none is as aware of this as Anantha Murthy himself. In his wisdom, he gives three father figures to Keshav, each exemplifying how a traditional society might function. One is his father, a sincere and devout Brahmin who fails to fulfil his responsibilities and obligations. He is too gullible, too impractical and ends up helplessly witnessing the liquidation of his patrimony, and the reduction of his family to penury. After wasting his life in such inefficiency, towards his last days, he suddenly becomes very worldly wise. But by now it is too late. This father, then, represents the failure of traditional, Hindu India, its ineptness and self-deception. This failure of leadership is what produces a Keshav, a person who is confused and disoriented. When our authority figures fail us, we suffer from a tremendous lack of self-confidence. This is the plight of any wounded or defeated civilization. Such a civilization suddenly finds itself in a new world, a world not of its own making, but a hostile world, where it is left to fend for itself. Its past has not equipped it to face up to this challenge. That is why it feels let down, betrayed and bitter – like Keshav.

What is the cause of this failure in leadership? It is, of course, the lying and mendacious uncle, in this case the younger brother of Keshav's father. It is he who has cheated Keshav of his inheritance. Yet, the difficulty here is that Keshav is not merely a victim; somewhere, his father's own complicity in his downfall, disallows Keshav that status. The pure victim may retain a certain innocence; but the humiliation of the defeated man is more complete and debilitating.

Yet, we must never forget the other uncle, Subbanna, the *sanyasi* who departs for Badri. Once or twice in the story, Keshav cynically thinks that even this uncle must have failed in his quest. But when we actually get to see him from close quarters later in the story, it becomes amply clear that such a man can know no failure. He has renounced the world with full knowledge and preparation, with the blessings of his elder brother. He therefore represents the triumph and continuity of tradition. As Keshav's father says to Subbanna by way of a benediction, 'You are a mahatma. Who am I to stop you from fulfilling the divine command? Go, let the whole world, birds and the beasts included, become blessed by your spiritual attainment' (73). Not only does Keshav's father bless his younger brother but also adds, 'Go and come back as a *sanyasi*. Then, I too will fall at your feet and be released from my karma' (*Ibid.*) What we see is that the older brother too can be redeemed by the renunciation of a younger brother.

The question in my mind is why isn't Keshav influenced by this uncle, by this aspect of tradition? Anantha Murthy does not answer this question

satisfactorily. There is merely the suggestion that such a path is not practicable for everyone. But this is dodging the question. It is not that every Keshav should become a Subbanna, but that the Keshavs of the world should be guided by the Subbannas, because only the latter can point out the dharma to the former. Such an opportunity is never presented in the book. Subbanna's presence is brief, albeit dazzling. He is sent off to Badri, quite out of Keshav's way and thus is of no help to the latter. Yet, his memory does serve as a powerful influence in Keshav's life.

## IV

I began this response with Raja Rao. I may as well end by referring to his work, even if peripherally. One of the things that Raja Rao told me that evening was rather startling. 'My novels only describe what happens to a man until he finds his Guru. I take the reader to that point. Then I stop. Because who can say what happens between you and the Guru? But the journey up to that point has to be described.'

My difficulty with Anantha Murthy's fictional world is related to this point in a tangential way. The real problem with a story like 'Clip Joint' is, as I had suggested earlier, is the absence of the Guru. This absence renders Keshav's existential problem insoluble. The story clearly shows that modernity cannot supply the answers. It also shows how tradition has failed. We are, like Keshav, trapped in an in-between state. What is the way out? There is no way out really, except the kind of ambiguity and double denial that Anantha Murthy offers. An affirmation is impossible without the Guru because it is the Guru who transcends tradition and saves one from the clutches of modernity. How can life be meaningful without the grace of the Guru?

I suspect that Anantha Murthy is clever enough to know this. As he puts it at the beginning of the story:

> We don't give up anything so easily, Stewart. Tell me, what would you do if you realized that what you were holding in your hand was a snake? You would instantly drop it on the ground, wouldn't you? You wouldn't pause to think what should be done, or agonize over whether it was right or wrong, would you? That's how self-realization is attainted, in a flash (36).

J Krishnamurti, I think, offers a similar example somewhere. If your house is on fire, do you stop to read a book on fire-fighting? Or do you seize whatever is at hand to put out the fire? The illumination which releases one from ignorance is like that. It is immediate and instantaneous. This Anantha Murthy well knows. Almost as a joke, the story has Stewart

discarding the pipe in his hand on the spur of the moment, as if it were the snake that Stewart has alluded to. But this grand gesture of quitting smoking once and for all is premature; Stewart borrows a cigarette from Keshav soon afterwards. This, unfortunately, is our predicament. We see our follies clearly, even make a pretence of giving them up, but merely substitute them with others later.

I would argue that Keshav is not really Anantha Murthy's mouthpiece. Keshav is, ultimately, a failure, a bad example. We are urged to look beyond Keshav and his weaknesses. Keshav's dilemma, his anxiety, his thirst is, after all, is not of the highest kind. In fact, there is no evidence that he actually seeks the deepest truths of his civilization. His is a more modest quest – it is the quest for some comfort from the indignities of his life, indignities which I have already pointed out are largely material and mundane. These cannot serve to symbolize the quest for the ultimate reality. Keshav, thus, does not seek God or the Guru or the Self or Gnosis. But the paradox is that the ultimate solution to his problems is that – called by any name – which he does not even seek consciously.

In that sense, Keshav's disillusionment is not convincing. If instead of a scheming stripper he had found a real English girlfriend, well-endowed and caring, he would most likely have found the little nirvana that he sought from his personal sufferings. Like Praneshacharya's epiphany, courtesy Chandri, Keshav too would have found his temporary solace. Yet, like the protagonist of *Samskara*, he would have still remained incomplete, still searching for the *samadhan* – contentment – that has eluded him.

That is why I believe that the allegorical reading that I had proposed earlier will not suffice ultimately. The striptease joint is, admittedly, only an extreme example of the sordidness of modernity. Can it be made to symbolize all of modernity? I think not. Modernity fails, not because it is like a strip joint; it fails even when it appears to offer us its best. It fails because it does not address our deepest needs while it caters very effectively to our baser and more practical requirements. This sort of paradox is never demonstrated in 'Clip Joint'. What Keshav needs may, in fact, be quite easily supplied by the modern West. His requirements – sex and money – are not too difficult to satisfy, only he looks for them in the wrong place. Keshav is pathetic because he can find neither and must, instead, resort to a nightclub to escape the wretchedness of his condition.

If so, then Stewart is certainly a more balanced and effective character. It is not Keshav but Stewart who lends credibility to the critique of modernity that is offered in the story. Because Stewart has already gone through the journey that Keshav has just embarked upon. He has not only experienced heterosexual sex but also homosexuality. He is well off financially. He has, therefore, the

best that the West can offer. And yet he is dissatisfied. His dissatisfaction does not emanate from his personal problems as does Keshav's. Rather, it is born out of his insight into the essential inadequacy of modern social arrangements. Stewart's critique is, thus, more far reaching and needs to be taken more seriously. It will take Keshav many more experiences of disillusionment before he can arrive at Stewart's position. Unfortunately, it is Keshav's bumbling and ineffectual explorations which are more engaging fictionally. That is because they are more personal, more intimately realized, while Stewart's ideas remain abstractions, mere pronouncements.

'Clip Joint' does give us an insight into the modern condition. At its best it is seen as culminating in a welfare state which robs the individual of purpose. At its worst, it is a cheat, like the stripper in the 'Clip Joint', alluring but devoid of satisfaction. Further, modernity in the form of Stewart even affords us the wherewithal to critique itself. Yet, this critique is insufficient, as I have suggested, because it is carried through to its limits. In Keshav, on the other, we see a disgruntled product of tradition, seeking to embrace modernity, but failing. Built upon the lesser vehicle that is Keshav, both critiques, of tradition as well as modernity, do not really become substantive. Consequently, Keshav finds himself trapped in a no man's land between two cultures, two countries, two ways of life, unable to affirm either. While in India, he is unable to set his siblings right. Earlier, he is unable to stand up to his father. Both to himself and to Stewart, he fails to explain how and why his forefathers have failed him. Fleeing from the past, he finds himself face to face with the sickening sordidness of the present. A misfit in both India and London, he is left with no clear options at the end of the story.

## V

I must confess that writers of my generation have had a love–hate relationship with Indian modernists, perhaps the most eminent example of whom is Anantha Murthy. Writers of his generation have been our literary progenitors in the sense that we have learned our craft from them. We have read them with the care we would normally bestow only to sacred texts. In fact, they taught us how to write, how to see, and how to feel. They gave us a vibrant new language, forged anew from the debris of romanticism and idealism. By rejecting tradition, they liberated us from its debilitating touch. Yet, none of them has given us the satisfaction which we have sought from great literature. What Masti or Karanth or Bendre can offer, Adiga or Ramanujan or Anantha Murthy cannot. What Mahatma Gandhi can give us, Jawaharlal Nehru cannot. What Sri Aurobindo can do for us, Nissim Ezekiel cannot.

At least not yet, or not fully.

This is not in any way to condemn or dismiss the modernists, but only to place them in their proper context. Some of them are important writers, even great writers, but there is something missing in them. And what is missing is so profound, so fundamental, so valuable that its absence colours their whole work. The honesty with which they acknowledge this makes them worthy of our respect. Indeed, we are thankful to them for their critical insights. Yet our aims are different. We must venture way beyond them if we have to live up to their legacy. They left us stranded in a limbo, suggesting that there was no way out from our present sorrows. We must, humbly and respectfully, chart our lonely road from that landscape of desolation, towards the paradise of a new world. The flesh was too much with our modernists; they were its prisoners and they left us trapped in its confines. Instead of *shreyas* they sought *preyas* and told us how awful their deserts were. So we say to them, we are tired of the exile. We want to return home.

The 'best' modernists, like Ezekiel or Ananta Murthy, show us glimpses of a world beyond their own, either in the past, as with Subanna, or in an as yet unrealized future. In doing so, they are able to transcend the modern condition which they know and depict so efficiently. Again and again we see this possibility in Ananta Murthy. This is what makes him one of the most important writers of our times.

# 7

# CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN *RICH LIKE US*

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) is her most ambitious and complex novel. Its importance, both artistic and political, was recognized in its being awarded the Sinclair Prize for fiction and the Sahitya Akademi award for the best Indian book in English for the year 1986. It is also the key novel to consider if we are examining how the women characters respond to the tradition–modernity issue. In it we find Sahgal's most scathing attack on tradition and her most radical political critique of India. Finally, in *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal properly enters the fictional domain of postmodernism. So far as the narrative shift is concerned, *The Day in Shadow* (1971) marks the end of the phase of straight narration. *A Situation in New Delhi* (1989) is a transitional novel in which the style becomes clipped and elliptical, the closure uncertain and abrupt. Sahgal has moved into new pastures formally. But the real breakthrough occurs, as I shall show, in *Rich Like Us*. From the more or less chronological progression of her previous work in which the fictional mode might be termed mimetic, Sahgal uses symbolism and allegory extensively in *Rich Like Us*. The earlier novels are, formally, somewhat dull and stodgy; they are boring in an upper class, well-bred, genteel, 'club' manner. But *Rich Like Us* attempts an adventurous form which is both challenging and refreshing.

Critics have pointed out how the concern with women's issues is naive in the earlier novels, acquiring a complexity only in *Rich Like Us*. There have also been attempts to suggest a break between the earlier women and Sonali. It is argued that the earlier women are essentially drifters, while the later ones are actors, taking the initiative to change their lives. Actually, I don't see such a break. There is, as Jasbir Jain says, a gradual evolution from the earlier to later ones (45–67). Sonali is a type of Rashmi, Saroj or Simrit. Their values are similar. The only difference is that Sonali is more self-aware and self-assured.

Thematically, then, I don't see a break in Sahgal's work in the middle phase. There is a fullness of harmony and realization as early as *Storm in Chandigarh*

(1969). In this significant novel, I find a clear articulation of not only Sahgal's values, but also of her solutions to the problems raised in her novels. The political conflict between the two chief ministers is averted; Saroj finds Vishal; Jit and Mara get back together; finally, when everything seems to have broken down, Vishal's typist, Man Singh, does show up to type his memo to the home minister. The reconciliation and breakthrough evident in this work are not suppressed in the later fiction. Yes, the subject shifts and with it the quality of realization too, but its basic ingredients are already available in *Storm in Chandigarh*. This novel celebrates the triumph of Saroj's spirit under every kind of adversity, and thus the victory of good over evil, the human over the *asuric* and so on.

As to thematic shifts, I see them in two places in Sahgal's career. There is a shift after the first novel; from the description of the social milieu in a small town to the problems of the beleaguered wife in *This Time of Morning* (1965). The middle phase consists of five novels – *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us* – all of which have the women's question at their centre. With *Rich Like Us*, this problem seems to have been fully worked out, after which there is again a shift in subject in *Plans for Departure* and *Mistaken Identity*. Though *Plans for Departure* has a woman protagonist, she is not fighting the system as the earlier novels. *Mistaken Identity* is entirely centred on a male protagonist reminding us of *This Time of Morning*, the first novel.

The reasons for considering *Rich Like Us* a more mature and politically radical book are discussed very persuasively by Pankaj K Singh, who argues that Sahgal has been moving to a recognizable feminist position from the subjective point of view in *The Day in Shadow* to the objective evaluation of social conditions in *Rich Like Us*:

> Unlike *The Day in Shadow* which almost naturalizes the arbitrary power dimension between the genders, *Rich Like Us* firmly rejects the arbitrary distribution of power, be it on the purely political level as it was during Emergency or on the interpersonal and familial level as in the gender roles in the society (145).

Singh substantiates her point by analyzing *The Day in Shadow* in detail. She sees a 'central paradox' in 'Simrit's over-dependence on Raj' – 'In a novel that seemed to begin with a woman's decision to seek freedom, ironically it is man [sic] who constantly provides the norm' (140).

Though Singh's article is full of insights, she tries to fit Sahgal into a feminist straitjacket whereas the novelist would appear to reject the hegemony of any master discourse. Indeed, Simrit's and Sahgal's feminism is imperfect. But it is

not very certain that Simrit sets out to be a feminist in the first place. Her decision to leave Som is not so much the assertion of equality or her quest of freedom as an act of survival. She is not a rebel to begin with. Moreover, Simrit has no quarrel with men or even with the apparent domination of men; what she rejects is a certain kind of man who embodies certain kinds of values. Under the circumstances Raj comes across as a miraculous example of the male sex, so different from the other shallow and oppressive men in her life. Yes, Simrit is blind to Raj's own limitations both as a man and as a human being, but this if at all, is a drawback in her self-realization not in her ideological make-up as a feminist.

But the point that *Rich Like Us* is the more complex novel is well taken. Its narrative technique, for instance, is polyphonic. The book alternates between a limited third person narration and Sonali's first person narrative. The third person narrative is largely from the viewpoint of Rose, except for chapters One, Six, Fifteen, Seventeen and Twenty. The following summary may help to explain the structure of the novel:

| **Chapters** | **Point of View** |
|---|---|
| One | Objective (moves from Neuman to Nishi, to Rose) |
| Two | Sonali |
| Three | Rose |
| Four | Sonali |
| Five | Rose |
| Six | Nishi |
| Seven | Sonali |
| Eight | Rose |
| Nine | Sonali |
| Ten | Rose |
| Eleven | Sonali |
| Twelve | Rose |
| Thirteen | Sonali |
| Fourteen | Rose |
| Fifteen | Kishori Lal |
| Sixteen | Rose |
| Seventeen | Kishori Lal |
| Eighteen | Rose |
| Nineteen | Sonali |
| Twenty | Nishi |
| Twenty-one | Sonali |

Thus, out of the twenty-one chapters, Rose and Sonali each have eight, Nishi and Kishori Lal two each; the opening chapter is from a broader, though not omniscient point of view. The Rose chapters tell the story of the Indo–British encounter, the gradual degeneration of modern Indian culture, and of Rose's life with Ram. The Sonali chapters are used to comment on the Emergency, to tell Ravi and Sonali's story, and also to trace the history of four generations of the Indian elite starting with Keshav Ranade's grandfather and coming down to Sonali. The Nishi and Kishori Lal chapters deal with the compromise of the new generation and the regeneration of the old.

To use Sonali's words at the beginning of the book, any reader of *Rich Like Us* soon becomes 'obsessed with symbols' (31). We can use Roman Jacobson's famous categories of the metonymic versus metaphoric narrative modes to illustrate this point. The novel operates simultaneously on two levels, the literal and the figurative, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, the metonymic and the metaphoric, the synchronic and the diachronic. The first set refers to the narrative on the literal level which works on the basis of contiguity and succession. The second set refers to the figurative implications of the narrative, to its allegorical and metaphoric meaning, which work through substitution. At the literal level, *Rich Like Us* is the story of the Emergency as seen from the viewpoint of the two main characters, Rose and Sonali. It is a compelling story even as it is. But it is on the metaphoric level that it assumes a stunning complexity and multivalency. Indeed, seen from this perspective, the novel is a sustained allegory of modern India, especially of its relationship with Britain. The commonplace view that the novel misses, on the other hand, comes from reading it literally only as a political novel that indicts the Emergency. Jasbir Jain's 'The Emperor's New Clothes: The Emergency and Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*', and O P Mathur's 'The Nausea of Totalitarianism: A Note on Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*' are typical examples. But I think my reading of the text as a political allegory which operates on two levels does greater justice to the text.[1]

Before I make such a detailed reading, let me summarize below a preliminary interpretation of the symbolic significance of the major characters.

[1] See Roman Jakobson on the metaphoric and metonymic poles in his essay, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbance', in Roman Jacobson and M Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (Mouton, The Hague, 1956). Also see David Lodge's *The Modes of Writing*. Frederick Jameson's argument that the Third World texts are often political allegories (*Social Text* 15, Fall, 1986) is particularly apt in this context.

| *Character* | *Description* | *Interpretation* |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Rose | British, working class, in love with Ram; frank, clear-headed, compassionate, attractive. | The 'good' West made up of liberal values, fair play, honesty, British empiricism, common sense; anti-romantic, against superstition; the England that loved India; fought against Hitler and so on. |

Rose is that aspect of Britain which crossed over to India and became a part of our past. True, her love for India and Ram may be a bit of a mystery; why she puts up with so much abuse from Ram is also not at all clear or convincing. But Rose represents that portion of Britain which loved India and was willing to suffer for it. Her working class origins distinguish her from her imperialistic brethren. The name 'Rose' itself suggests the mystic core of goodness within the West. Rose's candour, self-awareness, compassion, charity, empiricism, common sense and sense of fair play are what Indian culture might benefit from.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2. Marcella | Crafted in terms of the 'classic', upper class English beauty; sophisticated and ageless; also in love with India; stands for the British aristocracy. | Represents the ruling classes and their ambivalent attitude to India; Ram's affair with her symbolizes the selling out of Indian interests by our elite. |

Marcella begins by being clearly aligned with imperialism; her interest in things Indian is a sort of 'orientalism'. Her affair with Ram suggests that the Indian ruling classes will finally realign themselves with the British ruling classes. Interestingly, she changes in the end by helping out Sonali. Almost like the British upper classes turning collaborators of India after independence and bailing out modern India (Sonali) from the clutches of fascism.

| 3. Ram | Indian, upper class, dapper, male chauvinist, bigamist, fascinated by British woman; sensitive, intellectual, connoisseur of beauty; comatose at the beginning of the book. | The moribund aristocracy, morally duplicitous; hypocritical, corrupt, oppressors of women, yet charming, attractive, the 'bad' aspects of Indian tradition somehow alluring; but, finally, helpless, confused, dying. |
|---|---|---|

Ram is Hinduism or India trapped between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, India and the West. He is aligned both to traditional India (Mona) and the Western modernity (Rose). But he is devoid of life-sustaining values. Ram is perhaps Hinduism or Indian tradition at its worst. In a sense, he is the real villain of the novel, not Dev. It is he who gives birth to Dev and does nothing to check the latter's misdemeanours. Dev's forging cheques in Ram's name refers to the misuse of tradition of modern politicians. Ram also represents patriarchal values; he is selfish, two-timing and naive, but oppressive and insensitive nonetheless. Ram also shows the helplessness, the spineless confusion and inertia of the Indian elite.

| 4. Ram's father | The old Lalaji; anti-british; shrewd businessman; accepts Rose; honest and upright; the 'real' entrepreneur. | Lalaji represents the 'good', uncompromising, older generation; the real Indian tradition in a sense; he accepts Rose, which means he is not totally inflexible. |
|---|---|---|

Rose and Lalaji together build up the fortunes of the family after partition. This means that the new Indian state is built upon the foundations of the 'real' Indian tradition and modernity learned from the British.

| 5. Mona | Ram's first wife; tradition, pious, devoted, opposed to Rose at first, but makes up with her; spoils Dev. | Mona represents Indian womanhood; her devotion to Ram is monistic; she is the traditional woman, a loser and a sufferer; backward, but not 'bad'; a victim; the doting mother who spoils Dev. |
|---|---|---|

Mona is the traditional Indian woman – a giver, a loser, and a victim. She is never treated as an equal by Ram and scarcely as a human being, but she puts up with his abuse without a whimper. She is loyal, devoted and stubborn. Religious, irrational and superstitious, but not wicked or malicious. When Rose saves her life, she forgets the past and becomes her friend. Modernity, thus, must save tradition; when the victim is saved, she accepts modernity. The typical Indian mother, Mona spoils her male offspring by not deconditioning him of the evils of inheritance.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6. Sonali | Upper middle class, with civil service background; daughter of an honest ICS officer; inherits the Gandhian legacy from her father but also liberalism from the West at Oxford; upright, though marginalized; the real India and the heroine of the book; survives in the end. | The 'good' India; the best of both tradition and modernity; heterodox Hindu and Westernized liberal; critic of the Emergency; independent working woman; strong, courageous, the culmination of the earlier Sahgal women; liberated but not necessarily feminist. |

Sonali is the most important character in the novel. She represents the 'best' of modern India and also the Indian womanhood. She combines the finest Indian traditions with the positive aspects of modernity. She is aware of the evil of traditional Hinduism because of the *sati* of her grandmother; she is the new virtuous woman for whom virtue is courage, not self-sacrifice. She is aligned with Rose and with anti-Emergency forces. Her remaining single, points to the deficiency in modern Indian malehood. Ravi's failure to measure up to her is the failure of Indian men in general. Therefore, she is forced to remain single. Yet, she is neither helpless nor unhappy. She is marginalized, treated unfairly by the system, but she does not lose heart. Her survival in the end is a sign of hope for modern India.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7. Keshav Ranade | ICS, bureaucrat; withers away after Emergency is declared on 26 June 1975. | Bureaucrat of the old school; kind, upright, reformist Hindu; not a part of the Kashmiri 'Mafia'. |

Ranade seems to be modeled on Sahgal's own father, Ranjit Pandit. He represents the old bureaucracy which was nourished by the freedom movement.

He has also inherited from his father the legacy of his grandmother's *sati*. This makes him critical of tradition. Sonali is closely aligned to him, certainly his heir emotionally and spiritually.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 8. Ravi Kachru | IAS, Oxford educated bureaucrat; supports the Emergency; replaces Sonali; changes in the end. | The 'new' bureaucrat; guided not by norms but by expediency; essentially spineless; prefers readymade and easy answers to hard facts and analysis; also a victim in the end. |

Ravi has been Sonali's lover at Oxford, but has somehow turned back on his essence. He exemplifies compromise; the pliant bureaucrat, he actually plays a key role in the success of the Emergency. He lacks both courage and convictions. Allows himself to be used by the politicians. Thinks he is in control when he is actually a puppet. Shows a superficial assimilation of the West and an inadequate understanding of India. He belongs to a very old type in Indian politics, the courtier. Ultimately a case of self-delusion and self-betrayal, meant to contrast the bureaucrat of the old school, Ranade.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 9. Dev | Rich, spoiled brat, stupid and selfish, cruel, materialistic, opportunistic, becomes a new entrepreneur and finally a minister; Rose's killer. | A Sanjay Gandhi like figure; a monster who represents Emergency; the worst of both tradition and modernity; the elite–lumpen element in Indian politics. |

Dev is the child of the worst aspects of Indian tradition. He represents violence, greed, selfishness and cruelty – in a word, Indian politics gone bad. His stupidity and amnesia indicate that the new breed of politicians have no knowledge of their past. They have learned nothing from the Indian freedom movement. His means are fascistic and violent. His killing of Rose suggests not only that he is utterly immoral, but that he has no use for the lessons of liberalism, democracy or modernity.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 10. Nishi | Lower middle class girl who marries well; another victim who accepts the lies of the Emergency for personal benefit, but is betrayed by it, in her father's arrest. | Represents the survival instinct without a corresponding value system; shares the failure of Dev's generation in forgetting the past; ultimately, also a victim more than an oppressor. |

Nishi is a child of the partition. Growing up in a lower middle class home, she first tries to secure her future. She refuses to see that in her quest for affluence she is violating most of the laws of the country. Similarly, she refuses to see the evil that is in Dev. She and her socialite friends represent the failure of the elite to safeguard the interests of the country. Their active collaboration with the Emergency is motivated by self-interest and greed; this shows not just the apathy of the ruling classes but their willingness to sell the country for their own gains. The name, literally, means 'night'.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 11. Kishori Lal | Another old timer like Ram's father; failed academic; post partition, small-time trader; but still retains ambitions of doing good; stubborn and headstrong; his character really blossoms in jail when he is tortured. | Exemplifies the breakdown of civil rights during the Emergency; victim of police brutality and torture; uses techniques of *satyagraha* in jail; again, shows the hidden strengths of the middle class. |

Kishori Lal is an ordinary middle class person, a petty trader, his life is already a failure; the partition has defeated him. His arbitrary arrest shows the complete breakdown of law and order during the Emergency. This event, however, actually brings out the best in him. He learns to resist injustice and tyranny like a *satyagrahi*. His befriending the tortured student is an instance of heroism lurking within the middle class. He represents the 'Jan Sangh', the right-wing, pro-Hindu party, which resisted Indira Gandhi's Emergency and later merged into the Janata Party.

| 12. The crippled beggar | Landlords have broken his hands and legs; he lies by the tomb; passive, but not unintelligent; knows who killed Rose; may get a pair of artificial limbs by the end of the book. | The Indian masses who have been battered and crippled by the ruling classes. They are silent and helpless, but not yet dead. They are victims of endless oppression and injustice. |
|---|---|---|

The crippled beggar is perhaps the most important symbol in the book. His arms and legs have been broken by the landlord whom he was trying to oppose. This shows the suppression of the Indian masses by the brute force of the ruling classes. Rose is the only one who befriends him, who treats him like a human being. Sahgal implies that it is only a Western sense of the autonomy of the individual and the respect for the dignity of each human being, which will enable us to see the downtrodden people of India as our equals. Everyone else only thinks of him as an eyesore, the typical attitude of the elite to the suffering masses. The elites have failed in their obligations to the underprivileged. Only Rose's attempts to give him a pair of artificial arms might help restore his dignity and usefulness as a human being. He sees Rose's murder but is helpless. The masses, likewise, witness the atrocities, oppressions and injustices that surround them but are powerless to resist.

Putting all these interpretations together we see that *Rich Like Us*, though a bleak book, does not despair totally. Sonali survives and there is a hint at the end that Emergency will end after all. The crippled beggar, too, may get his hands back. Also, Kachru becomes Ravi again, disillusioned by the excesses of Emergency. So there is hope for the bureaucracy too. Overall, in *Rich Like Us* it does appear that India will survive – but just about.

In spite of this guarded optimism, it is Sahgal's most gloomy book. The murder of Rose is the nadir of Sahgal's pessimism. Never before or after has a main character been murdered so tragically and helplessly. There is also a real *sati* in this book in addition to reports of rape, burning and torture. We see the brutality of the police, the politicians and the landlords. Peasant women are raped and fed into brick kilns; their husbands are beaten or maimed when they try to resist oppression. We see the lumpenization of the Indian politics and the abuse of power on an unprecedented scale.

But while the book is very self-critical, it is rather soft on the West. Everything about the West is seen favourably. Even imperialism, so obviously the enemy during the freedom movement, does not have strong critics in the book. Ranade is merely an agonized and confused spectator

of the last days of the Raj. The book, thus, lacks a strong anti-Western centre. While India is viewed critically throughout, the West is seen as if with tinted glasses. As Uma Parmeshwaran in her critical review of *Rich Like Us* in *World Literature Today* puts it: 'One would think that the misguided stereotyping of the English as the cream of human intelligence, the milk of human kindness, the backbone of human fortitudes, would have been buried with colonial imperialism' (361–2). Despite the mixed metaphors, Parameswaran's comment seems justified.

Rose, Marcella and even Freddie or Minnie are positive characters. While blaming ourselves and our tradition, Sahgal would appear to condone the violence of colonialism and capitalism. She sees the West as the repository of not just liberal values, but of human rights, decency, democracy and civil liberties. India, by contrast, becomes a dark continent, dominated by disease, poverty, injustice, oppression, religious superstition, communalism, casteism, bigamy, *sati*, rape, torture, violation of civil rights, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, greedy and crooked socialites, exploitative ruling classes, crushed and defeated masses and so on. This, to my mind, is a drawback. It also makes the motivation for Rose's character weak. What exactly is it that attracts her and makes her hold on to Ram? Why does she put up with so much abuse from him? This is not clear. For a traditional Hindu wife, the convenient excuse could be her dharma as a wife, but this will not work with Rose. It would seem that Rose is mesmerized by Ram and India, tied by mysterious threads of destiny to both. The narrator tells us that after meeting Ram, she had 'entered an emotional labyrinth and she was drawn magnetically on […] a victim of casual unthinking sorcery' (38). Many years later, she tells Freddie:

> You know how it was with me, Freddie, when I came out here. It wasn't me making up my mind. It was outside me, bigger. If I was a Hindu and believed in other lives, I'd say I must've been here before and wanted to come back (107).

Sahgal appears to be falling back on those old stereotypes of the labyrinthine, complex, and mysterious mind of the Hindu versus the simple, straightforward, commonsensical Westerner. Surely, this is a mystification. The English came to India for profit; later they colonized us for profit. Moreover, in the novel, Ram is not even complex in any attractive or superior way. His polish is merely superficial, a gloss or veneer which peels off on closer observation. Rose's motivations then, are too vague to be convincing.

The only way to solve the mystery that is Rose is to consider her as someone who has learned from India, not one who comes to teach us. She

belongs to the Mrs Moore type of Englishwoman who has a mysterious love for India, a spiritual affinity with our culture. However, this semi-mystic type does not quite fit Rose, as we know her. Likewise, it would be hard to make a case for Rose's representing the best of Indian tradition because she never quite loses her Englishness. She not only retains her Cockney accent till the end, but her room, a small English preserve in an otherwise Indian household, is a marker of her identity, her attempt to preserve a continuity with her English past. Another possibility would be to see her as an adventurer, someone who crosses boundaries, whose zest for life is her motivating force. But, again, why would an adventurer stay on through the kind of travail that Rose endures, only to be murdered in the end? In the end, the most important character in the novel is also the least convincing.

Rose is not the only problem with the book. The depiction of the entire Indo–British encounter is, ultimately, unsatisfactory. This is an important issue because the book itself is dedicated to 'The Indo–British Experience and what its sharers have learned from each other'. If this is indeed the key theme of the book, then it turns out that they have, indeed, very little to learn from us while we have everything to learn from them. This inequality in Sahgal's portrayal of the encounter is disappointing. While it is true that Sahgal would have us accept all those who came to us from the West and gave us, so to speak, their lives without branding them either imperialists or orientalists in the post-colonial fashion. While she would have us own up to the totality of our mixed inheritance of colonialism, she still fails to offer any lesson to our 'Other', the West. What have they got from us? If we were to believe Sahgal's account in *Rich Like Us*, then it would be bigamy, hypocrisy, intolerance and finally a cruel death. Surely, India gave them, and continues to, give more than that.

Such coloring to the narrative becomes inevitable when we see who represents the Indian side. Ram and Dev are the worst possible Indians that Sahgal could have thought of. Ram's charm is superficial; actually, he is a self-centred and willful liar. He lacks both integrity and character. He is a shallow person with little knowledge of either India or Europe. Quite inferior to Vishal, Raj or Shivraj, he is an inadequate and miserable standard bearer for India. And Dev, his idiotic, frighteningly amoral, and murderous son, a pathological case of a diseased Indian mind, is an even worse example of an Indian.

On the other hand, British characters are, invariably, portrayed at their best. Even Marcella, superficial, upper class, predatory, redeems herself towards the end by extending a helping hand to Sonali. Does this mean that the British aristocracy will always retain their values while the Indian

elites betray theirs? And must Sonali, the modern Indian woman, if not modern India herself, live on the handouts of the West as she does when the novel ends? Even in Sonali's grandfather's manuscript, Mr Timmons, the Collector, comes out a real hero, a liberal paternalistic sahib. His friendship with Keshav's grandfather is unconvincing; the turn of the century was the period when the sense of Empire was, perhaps, the strongest. The divide between the ruled and the ruler, black and white, Indian and English, was then at its height. How implausible to suggest that Keshav's father recuperated at the Timmons' from the shock of his mother's *sati*. If Mr Timmons was all that benevolent or effective, why didn't his assistants prevent the illegal self-immolation, which in any case, was illegal? Not just Rose, Marcella or Mr Timmons emerge as angelic in Sahgal's novel, the minor British characters are also really decent folks. Rose's parents, limited but brave, are working class people who, in their own way, stand up to Hitler and perish in the blitz, sacrifices to England's liberty. Freddie, good old Freddie, who is such a decent loser in love, the typical British sport, is also brave Freddie who fights for his country and the rest of the free world against Hitler's hellish hordes. Minnie, part of the lower order of the British in India, is so cultured and polite to Rose nonetheless. If the Indo–British encounter were to be judged from this book it would appear that the British are the ones who are civilized, while we are the barbarians. Is not this the image which colonialism sought to propagate with ideas such as the white man's burden and the civilizing mission of the Empire? Is not Sahgal, in her moments of despair with the Indian situation, unwittingly reproducing such colonialist stereotypes?

If there are other flaws in the novel, the chief of these is possibly the *sati* incident. That a *sati* could happen in a family so progressive and advanced is perhaps Sahgal's deliberate note of warning, if not the report of an actual event. But the manner of its portrayal is still unconvincing. Ranade's grandmother doesn't seem to be the sort to be pushed around easily, let alone murdered. The motivation for her consent is not worked out sufficiently; it seems that she agreed to commit *sati* as a part of a deal with her brother-in-law about her son's inheritance (135). But this aspect is not brought out clearly or emphasized. The self-sacrifice or strength of character of Ranade's grandmother are, similarly, not demonstrated in her sudden self-immolation. The whole effect is painful and confused, almost as if the event were too horrible, too unbearable to even fictionalize. Also, a *sati* after the cremation of the husband is technically impossible unless the widow was not available during the cremation (not true in this case) or if she were menstruating (not indicated in this case). So the whole incident seems somewhat lurid and hazy, however powerful in symbolic

import. But the biggest flaw seems to be that the *sati* takes place after it has been outlawed in India, which makes its occurrence even more implausible.[2]

The chronology of the novel has been meticulously planned from the time of Sonali's great grandfather. Similarly Rose's story too has an elaborate chronology, going back to her birth in 1912. But at least at one point the scheme seems to fail. We are told that in August 1969 Ranade is fifty-two (150). This means that he was born in 1917. We know that Sonali was born in 1937 (she is thirty-eight in 1975). This means that Ranade was twenty when his daughter was born. We know that Sonali is the younger daughter (160); so Kiran has to be born before 1937. Would not that make Ranade an implausibly young father?[3]

In conclusion, it seems to me that *Rich Like Us* is an important, ambitious, but slightly flawed book. While its depiction of the Indo–British encounter is unsatisfactory, its handling of the problem of women is both insightful and socially relevant. Rose and Sonali embody two different versions of the story of the oppression of contemporary women. Rose does not give up, but is killed; Sonali, who also fights back against the system, survives. Is Sahgal suggesting that only through inner strength, self-reliance, independence even into spinsterhood, can women live with dignity and self-respect in India?

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[2] In a letter to this writer dated 26 August 1991, Ms Sahgal acknowledged the *sati* in the book was based on an incident in her own family. Her paternal great-grandmother (Ranjit Pandit's grandmother) committed *sati.* But I am concerned with the fictional representation of this event within *Rich Like Us* and of its appropriateness to its immediate context.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Ms Sahgal for being so generous and kind as to read a draft of this chapter and to offer numerous, valuable suggestions on how it might be improved.

[3] May I be permitted to a small aside on the name, 'Ranade'? Keshav Ranade is described as Saraswat Brahmin in *Rich Like Us*, but Ranade is a surname which only Chitpavan (or *Konkanastha*) Brahmins have. Ought Sahgal to have chosen a different name?

# 8

# TOWARDS REDEFINING BOUNDARIES: The Indo–Canadian Encounter in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*

## I

My first move in this essay would be to problematize the notion of boundaries in the words 'Canadian' and 'Indian'. This question becomes especially pertinent when we try to map the connections between these two countries, the most obvious of which is that both are 'post-colonial'. However different the two post-colonialisms might be, the obvious common ground is in the condition of being what we might call the Other of the metropolis. A common refrain in 'Canlitcrit' is the trauma of being marginalized by the two metropolitan cultures of the 'mother' countries in Europe and the big bad brother to the south, nearer home. Our difference from the dominant culture of our erstwhile imperial masters and our continuing link with it is also the running theme of modern Indian culture and life. Both countries also share the sense of being marginalized and reduced to a state of inferiority because of such colonization.

In the Canadian imaginary, this feeling has led to what has been called the 'cringe' mentality. In his introduction to one such 'standard' work on the subject, *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture,* David Staines cites the correspondence of an early Canadian writer, Susanna Moodie. Moodie wrote two major books whose titles are nothing if not self-explicatory: *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearing versus the Bush* (1853). Staines quotes Moodie as saying: 'love for Canada was a feeling very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave' (7). He also reports Moodie's English correspondent writing back: 'Don't fill your letters to me with descriptions of Canada. Who, *in England,* thinks of *Canada!*' (*Ibid*). Similarly, Staines quotes from Douglas

Bush's famous essay in *Canadian Forum* (1922). 'No one reads a Canadian novel unless by mistake. Canadian fiction never comes to grip with life, but remains weak and trivial; it has nothing to say' (9). Obviously, it was against such notions that Margaret Atwood was reacting when she said, 'I started to read Canadian literature in self-defence; we got tired of people telling us there wasn't any and that we should therefore, not exist, or go to New York' (Staines 97–8). All these quotations go to show the condition of marginality that the Canadian subject experienced. In so far as Canlit is considered, this condition is both defined and resisted in Atwood's minor masterpiece, *Survival.*

Therefore, this sense of marginality, it was obvious to me, was a common ground for connecting the Indian and Canadian experience. But while this point need not be belaboured, its obverse too must not be forgotten. While Canada is a post-colonial society, it is also an advanced, industrially developed, prosperous country, one that is part of the hegemonic West. In that sense, Canada, to us is not unlike England or America, or at least related to them, just as Australia, a slightly smaller country than Canada too is. Canada, thus, is post-colonial, but 'first' world; such a definition helps suggest its ambiguity and dualism in the politics of global culture.

Moreover, within Canada, are suppressed minorities for whom its so-called mosaic is perhaps a genteel and less terrifying version of apartheid. It is in this context that a rather ironic connection emerges between the Indian in India and his namesake – the native American in Canada. Any recent book on Canadian literature pays a customary homage at the beginning to the contribution of the native Americans or first nations to Canadian culture and literature. Obviously, when we normally speak of Indians and Canadians, the reference is not to *those* 'Indians' but to us, the Indians of South Asia. But what about South Asian Indians *in* Canada? Neither they nor the first nations can be 'simply' Canadians. It is nuances such as these to which we must be sensitive when we speak of Indo–Canadian encounters. But nearly *all* the 'Indians' mentioned so far have this in common: they have suffered a history of oppression and colonialism and some of them continue to do so within a somewhat racist, if multicultural, Canadian society.

I have been harping on confused identities to make a simple point: what is 'Canadian' or what is 'Indian' can by no means be taken for granted. Moreover, this problem of borderlines, as I propose to illustrate shortly, cuts both ways. McLuhan had called Canada 'a land of multiple borderlines, psychic, social, and geographic' (Staines, 244); but the remark is equally applicable to India. 'Indianness', for us has always been slippery ground, hotly contested through the centuries. Geography, nationality, religion and

affiliation are only few of the factors which go into defining who is or is not an Indian. And, as far as India is concerned, these factors are never rigid or given, but fluid and open. What we have therefore in the Indo–Canadian encounter is not so much a direct one way or two way interaction, but a complex set of overlapping categories and manoeuvres. To illustrate, from Indian to Canadian literature is not such a difficult leap today. Not just because of Commonwealth or post-colonial connections, but because of the bridge of the Indian diaspora within Canada, the two literatures and cultures are interconnected. If Canada cannot come to India, India can go to Canada; if I cannot bring Canada home to me, I certainly can take my India abroad to Canada. Instead of looking for a connection between Canada and India, we might look for a living connection within Canada or India.

When we come to the Indian diaspora within Canada, we find an instance of a minority within a minority. We know how marginal Canadian literature itself is in the multinational enterprise known as English Studies. The dominance of the Anglo–American combine is self-evident in our syllabi in India and all over the world. Canada is this very large country geographically but which is clearly at the periphery of the discipline. In our libraries, the tenuous place of Canadian literature is made possible, as we know, by the new legitimacy accorded first to commonwealth and then to post-colonial literature. But when it comes to the works of the South Asian minority within Canadian literature, even such legitimations sometimes fall short. The major books on Canadian literature, no doubt, have little room for the South Asian contribution, and the libraries are bound to follow the canons that such books create.[1] However, serious work in this area has already begun with works such as *Search for Meaning: The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin* edited by Suwanda H J Sugunasiri (Office of the Secretary of State, Ottawa, 1983). There are also a few published and unpublished papers on this subject including M G Vassanji's pioneering essay, 'South Asian Canadian Literature'.

Perhaps, this chapter itself illustrates all these factors. It is a product of these multiple marginalities that so characterize the post-colonial

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[1] An assorted sampling of books on Canadian literature reveals that the South Asian contribution finds little or no mention, though this will, doubtless, change with time. See *A History of Canadian Literature* by W H New (Macmillan, London, 1989); *Introduction to Canadian Literature* by W J Keith (Longmans, London, 1985); *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* edited by William Toye (Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1983); *Modern English–Canadian Prose: A Guide to Information Sources* complied by Helen Hoy (Gale, Detroit, 1983). The last book is an annotated bibliography of primary sources and the absence of the South Asian contribution in such a work is quite a serious matter.

condition. It has arisen not only out of research, but out of an impossibility to research given the lack of resources such as books and journals. My main author, Bharati Mukherjee was then somewhat unclassifiable because she had just made her much publicized move from Canada to the US. It was *The Middleman and Other Stories* that catapulted her into notoriety. She received a prestigious literary award for this book and then went on a media tour promoting it and herself as a born-again American. Yet, some still regarded her as an Indian writer because that is where her first two novels were published. *Days and Nights in Calcutta,* the text under consideration, was not available anywhere in Hyderabad, the city I lived in when I first wrote this essay, neither in the American Studies Research Centre Library, the CIEFL (Central Institute of English And Foreign Languages) library, or the University of Hyderabad libraries. So this was an exercise in which obtaining the key texts and secondary sources required a Herculean effort. But its very writing in the face of such odds shows the possibility of post-colonial survival. The subject of the chapter is, thus, itself; it expresses, allegorizes and demonstrates its own marginality.

## II

*Days and Nights in Calcutta*[2] is an unusual travel book. It contains two narratives of a journey to India. The first is by Clark Blaise and the second is by Bharati Mukherjee. Is the book co-authored by the two, or is it two different books in one? Are both authors responsible for both narratives or only narratives that they wrote themselves? Moreover, what are the identities of the authors? Is Clark Blaise a Canadian author or an American author or an Anglo–Indian author (in the extended sense of a European writing about India)? Is Mukherjee an Indian author or a Canadian author, now after her public disavowal of both her Canadian and Indian nationalities and acceptance of American citizenship, an incipient American author?

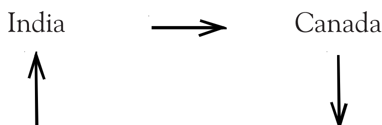
If we accept that shifting borderlines are the defining feature of a Canadian identity, we should have no trouble in accepting both Blaise and Mukherjee as Canadian authors. At least when the book was written, in 1974–75, both lived and worked in Canada and were visiting India from there. If we allow Mukherjee to be a Canadian author, we must certainly also allow her an Indian identity, however residual. As an

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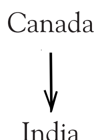
[2] All quotations are from the Doubleday New York edition of 1977, henceforth abbreviated as DNC). In 1986 the book was reissued by Penguin India with a new epilogue, 'How It All Turned Out'.

expatriate writer and later as an immigrant to America, she does not cease to be Indian in the extended sense of the term that I have already indicated. While in India and having been married to an Indian woman, Blaise becomes the obverse of what Mukherjee is in Canada. He is an expatriate Canadian writing in and about India.

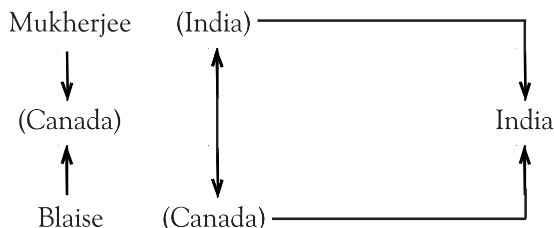
Much can be said of the resulting encounters between Indian and Canadian experiences. We have in this book the experiences of an Indian expatriate in Canada returning to India (Mukherjee):




And of a somewhat more direct encounter of an American-born Canadian in India:




Moreover, these two journeys are simultaneous and therefore interact with each other. That is, there is a simultaneous Indo–Canadian encounter going on between Blaise and Mukherjee all the while that both are encountering India, with Canada of their memories carried over:




To sum up then, the following are some of the types of Indo–Canadian encounters that the book makes available:

1. The encounter between Blaise and Mukherjee, who are husband and wife. (Their two children, Bernie and Dart, are therefore literally Indo–Canadians).
2. The encounter between Blaise, a Canadian, and India.

3. The encounter between Mukherjee, an Indian, and Canada – seen in the reminiscential portions of the book.
4. The encounter between an Indianized Blaise and his Canadian values.
5. Finally, the encounter between a Canadianized Mukherjee and India, that is Mukherjee's return to India as an Indo–Canadian writer.

Such a scheme does make DNC a convenient, if not a quintessential book, on the Indo–Canadian encounter. But I am not sure that this is sufficient to show that it is an important book in its own right. Indeed, going by how it has been read, the book is more easily overlooked than discussed. Yet, as a travelogue, the book has useful insights to offer on India and on the way India is read in a cross-cultural encounter. It can, for instance, be compared with other accounts such as V S Naipaul's or discussed in the broader perspective of travel writing on India. I myself perceive an unresolved tension in this chapter, a tension between a perceived obligation to do justice to the contents of the book and the necessity of using it as an illustrative example of a larger thesis that I have already proposed. What follows, then, is a general discussion of the form of the book before narrowing down to the manner in which the book exemplifies the Indo–Canadian encounter.

Though the book is a travelogue, its structure is akin to fiction. Such a point is neither very difficult to accept nor very new. As Wallace Martin shows in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) the distinction between fiction and non-fiction narrative is at best tenuous. DNC shares some of the following features with works of fiction, it has a plot, i.e., it has been organized and structured carefully, with a definite beginning, middle and end. Both Blaise's and Mukherjee's narratives manipulate the sequence of events for dramatic effect. Blaise's story begins with the burning of their house in Torornto and ends with a huge marriage in Calcutta. Mukherjee's narrative, it turns out, de-emphasizes their immediate past in Torornto, going back to her childhood and youth in India. Hence, it is about the growth and development of a writer's consciousness, from childhood to this present journey through India. Mukherjee's story, too, ends with the marriage scene of a relative in Calcutta. Both narratives are structured with great artifice; it is this conscious artistry that makes them more than mere reportage. The narratives also have characters, chiefly the protagonists, Blaise and Mukherjee, many other relatives, friends, acquaintances. Thus, the narratives are not merely subjective and centred in the selves of the narrators; a whole range of other actors enter. As in fictional works, these characters interact, grow, change and push the story forward. Other fictional elements such as the use of symbol and imagery, setting, atmosphere and theme are also fundamental to not just writing

but representation itself and their use can also be demonstrated in this text. Finally, the two epilogues effect a nice reversal, Mukherjee's proceeding Blaise's. Blaise himself was well aware of this novel-like quality of the book:

> *Days and Nights* [...] was a novel for me, very much a non-fiction novel, with a clear sense of myself as a character, making me a little more naive than I was, a little more priggish than I am, in order to, I hope, create a believable transformation of character by the end (Cameron, 23).

One of the curious paradoxes of the book, which was spotted by some of its reviewers too, is that while Blaise is more open to India, Mukherjee, though an Indian herself, is more nervous, uptight, and close-minded.[3] As I read through the book, I discovered that implicit to both narratives is a complex interaction between cultural information and the formation of the self. The way the world perceives us has a lot to do with our nationality, gender, colour and social status; their determinants, in turn, inform the subject. The highly ordered and stratified society of India reveals such fine refinements of social determinations that Blaise and more especially Mukherjee live out a complex play of inclusions and exclusions. What emerges however, is that Blaise is psychologically more secure than Mukherjee is, perhaps because he is white, Anglo-Saxon, Western and male. Mukherjee, on the other hand, is not only coloured Indian and female, but also an exile, an expatriate; the stress on her self is bigger and generates greater neurosis. The result is a difference in the quality of their observations: Blaise's narrative is more 'objective', while Mukherjee's is more 'subjective'.

This difference in perceptions is just one aspect of the Indo–Canadian encounter between husband and wife that is subterranean to the whole book. There are tensions, conflicts and exchanges between the two which are for the most part subtle, but sometimes surface perilously. Often, the tensions have to do with how Blaise perceives India. Nowhere is this more evident than when Blaise finds himself needling the editor of a successful Bengali magazine about what he (the editor) has missed in coming back to India. The editor, instead, is seen evasive, replying usually with studied flippancy, and occasionally with a devastating counter-offensive:

> he asked me – not for an answer, but as a speculative notion – how it was that all whites in India, like Ronald Segal (*The Crisis of India)*, assumed

[3] See, for instance, Newsweek, 73, pp. 89 (14 February, 1977), *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1977, and *The New Yorker, 53, pp. 42* (11 April 1977).

> an unassailable superiority. What was it, did I think, about their training that made them feel that their standards, their judgements, were all clearer, sharper, and more just than the local's? (106)

Mukherjee, having borne the brunt of racism herself, is hypersensitive to any trace of it within her relationship with Blaise. She more than amply revenges herself and Calcutta and indeed the entire colonized world against Blaise for his insensitivity. Blaise reports:

> I was not yet able to tolerate his [the editor's] satisfaction with Calcutta, his ironies with the West. Yet *here I was,* as Bharati would later remind me, a foreigner in Calcutta asking a native-born Calcuttan who had come back to his home in order to rise to the top of his profession, about his disappointment and dissatisfaction. (And for me to have snickered, during the ten years of our marriage, when visiting Bengalis would ask the same of Bharati in Montreal, 'What have you given up? Is it worth it?' For the next year, I was to hear her answers, and it has shaken our marriage to its core (104).

The parenthetical note is, to me, more important than the situation that Blaise and Mukherjee are debating over. Blaise has 'naturally' assumed that Mukherjee has not given up much to marry him and settle in Montreal; on the other hand, the Bengali journalist, who has returned to his native Calcutta, has automatically lost a lot by leaving the metropolitan West. If Blaise and Mukherjee's relationship is to be read as an allegory of the Indo–Canadian encounter, then this small incident assumes crucial importance. The message is clear: the Indo–Canadian encounter, if it is to be fruitful, cannot be built upon naive assumptions about the superiority of Canadian life and culture. Such assumptions, it would seem, are fallacious based as they are upon the specious logic of neocolonialism. Instead, a successful relationship requires, besides love and cooperation, a sensitive understanding of the underlying social and cultural factors involved in self-definitions. Mukherjee, if Blaise's last remark is taken seriously, reproaches and punishes him for one whole year for not a personal so much as a racial, cultural, even national insensitivity.

The reversal of attitudes implied in this situation is instanced on many other occasions too. Blaise finds that Calcutta is more metropolitan than Montreal, more intellectually alive and culturally active. He meets Satyajit Ray who over the telephone offers him news of the latest reviews of Bharati's novel, *The Tiger's Daughter,* which had just come out in a British edition (126). In contrast he recalls the 'appalling and funny' incident in Montreal when he and Mukherjee had gone to a neighbourhood bookshop to enquire about the

latter's just released novel. Brandishing a copy of *Newsweek,* in which a review and a 'glamorous shot' of Mukherjee had just appeared, they confront the owner of the bookshop. He refuses to stock the book claiming that its publisher, Houghton Mifflin, is too insignificant. The Blaises respond predictability:

> We went through the various permutations of civilized outrage: Houghton Mifflin was not a vanity press. He even had other Houghton Mifflin titles on his shelves. 'Yes, well', he apologized 'maybe one or two'. He complimented her on the nice write-up, and then added, 'I couldn't help noticing that you're East Indian, too. Is she a relative of yours?' (136)

This is just one instance of the blasé small town racism of Montreal versus the sophisticated internationalism of Calcutta. After meeting a host of other distinguished personalities including Manishankar Mukherjee, Sunil Gangopadhyaya, Sumitra Chatterjee, Amartya Sen and Raj Kapoor (at the premiere of *Bobby*) in addition to relatives, several upper and middle class friends of Bharati's – businessmen, managing directors of corporations, distinguished civil servants and other culture buffs, Blaise comes to a conclusion:

> I didn't believe that anyone, no matter what his language, could live in Calcutta for a year without discovering his own circle of young Bengalis, all passionately devoted to the future of Luso-Bengali, or Urgo-Bengali literature, all functionaries or unemployed by day, and scholar-poets by night. One returns from Calcutta with a sense that his own cultural credentials have suffered a disastrous devaluation while he has been gone (132).

The colony has become the metropolis and the metropolis the colony.

It is not hard to argue, then, that this long journey through India, far from shrivelling up his compassion as he says of V S Naipaul (138), actually takes on the dimension of a pilgrimage for Blaise. At its beginning we saw him physically and spiritually exhausted, plagued with disasters and bad luck:

> Last year, between December and April [...] I had nearly died. Perhaps, in that metaphorical way that is more real to me than any injury, I did die. [...] I became, in fact as well as in imagination, disaster-prone. I feared I had used up my good luck, my inheritance, my unearned advantages. From this moment on, I would view myself as a *bad risk.* In our culture, it is the ultimate disgrace (4).

Blaise had fallen on ice and broken his hand; then his house burnt down owing to the babysitter's carelessness in making French fries; and finally he had Mukherjee have an accident in which the latter 'had cracked the windscreen with her head' (8). After these devastating setbacks, it is in India that Blaise is healed and restored, a process which starts on his very arrival: 'From the moment we landed, India conspired to write this journal' (10). In fact, the book itself is proof of this. By restoring to Blaise his vocation as a writer, India is giving back to him his beaten and beleaguered self. Through Bombay and Calcutta does India work on Blaise, with an occult interlude in Baroda with Joshi-bua, the astrologer. The latter, incidentally, not only guesses, quite accurately, what Blaise has been through, but also predicts a long life of eighty-one years for him *and* a very fat bank balance.

Yet, India has not necessarily been entirely kind or gentle to Blaise; as we have seen earlier, what Blaise learned about himself and the West here almost breaks his marriage. At the beginning, as Blaise puts it, 'I was, if anything, ripe for change, new settings, new images. I wanted to *acquire* India to replace all that I had lost or outgrown' (137). Perhaps, not unlike Adela Quested and all Westerners, who 'go to India to check out our groovy karmas', Blaise has also yearned for 'nothing less than transcendence and transformation':

> I too had yearned for transformation in the year to come. I would shed my 'learning', gather my humanism about me, trust my eyes and ears, and diligently search for caves to be reborn in. It would still have everything to do with *growth:* I would see more, read more, do more; therefore I would be wiser, better. It would be a quantum leap in personal growth. It was time to test my capacity for sustained absorption. So much of Bharati was unknown to me because I had not been able to appreciate the texture of her first twenty-one years. I must have thought our marriage would deepen, grow even stronger. (138)

All these expectations and desires, it turns out, are fulfilled, but not without some unexpected surprises:

> My voyage to understand India would stop ridiculously short of its goal. But what I *would* see clearly for the first time was that whole bloated, dropsical giant called the West, that I thought I knew profoundly (138).

Instead of acquiring India, Blaise has acquired himself; instead of understanding India, Blaise has understood the West. Just as Canada gives one one's India back, India gives back Canada to the Canadian.

In a chapter on redefining boundaries and seeing the self in the other, the following reading on Mukherjee's version of the Indian journey will not be hard to believe, if not foretell. Neat reversals are tempting though often fallacious, but I wish to yield to the temptation for once. I would like to suggest that while Blaise gets back his self from this journey, Mukherjee loses it. This is Mukherjee's passage from India, her requiem to her motherland, even as she prepares for and looks forward to her public dramatization of her 'conversion' to American citizenship later. I see DNC as the mid-point of Mukherjee's career from India to the USA, from being an expatriate to an immigrant. In this scheme, her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) illustrate the predicament of an expatriate writer. The focus is very much on India, on characters, not unlike Mukherjee herself, who find themselves out of place in North America. After DNC are two collections of short stories. *Darkness* (1980) is the most deeply felt of the two and can be seen as the dark night of her soul. Here we experience Mukherjee's anguish in her tortured limbo before the glorious, celebratory, breakthrough into the liberating dawn of America in *The Middlemen and Other Stories.* (1988) Now her characters are no longer exiles and expatriates, but immigrants who give themselves to the material and sexual freedom of America, often with shocking immodesty. In such a map of Mukherjee's career, DNC is the turning point. It is during this journey that she has settled her past and said her goodbyes to India. Just as Blaise has understood his own culture better after being removed from it, Mukherjee had, in the past, maintained an excessive and unreasonable love for India in Canada. This journey has finally cured her of it. As she says in her Epilogue, 'I no longer liked India in the unreal and exaggerated ways I had in Montreal' (284). This realization is not devoid of a painful irony because instead of the continuity with her past that she expected to find, the journey has instead resulted in a break. The all too familiar pattern of a compulsive rejection of the past which Mukherjee has used as a precarious defence mechanism, has reaffirmed its psychological primacy in this text, and indeed, in her narrative technique.

It is not as if Mukherjee is unaware of her neurosis. She acknowledges that it is she who has packaged her life into watertight compartments:

> My life, I now realise, falls into three disproportionate parts. Till the age of eight I lived in a typical joint family, indistinguishable from my twenty cousins, indistinguishable, in fact, from an eternity of Bengali Brahmin girls. From eight till twenty-one we lived as a single family, enjoying for a time wealth and confidence. And since twenty-one I have lived in the West. (179)

And now comes the devastating admission: 'Each phase required a repudiation of all previous avatars; an almost total rebirth' (*Ibid.*) As I read these words I feel a poignant sense of both prophecy and wish-fulfilment. This admission becomes the key to an understanding of all of Mukherjee's fiction. It explains what she sees as she enters India and what she concludes at the end of the journey. The need for psychological order and coherence imposes its own self-fulfilling logic on her perceptions. I read Mukherjee's self-assessment as a statement of a post-colonial, feminine malaise. It's terribly sad that unlike Blaise, Mukherjee has no other resources except repudiation, exclusion and disavowal as strategies of containment. It is this strategy that we see again and again in *Jasmine* (1989), as the eponymous heroine goes from one identity to another, shedding and shredding her past with psychotic ease.

As she herself admits, Mukherjee's inner world is fragile; it needs constantly to be saved or shored up. It is as if her self is out of joint, looking for the security that only home can give. This she cannot find in Canada:

> In Canada I feel isolated, separate in the vastness of this under populated country. I cannot bring myself to snowshoe or ski. Unspoiled nature terrifies me. I have not yet learned the words to the national anthem. I tell myself I shall never make friends here, though, in truth, I am lying; I am unlikely to make friends in any country. In Canada I am both too visible and too invisible. I am brown; I cannot disappear in a rush-hour Montreal crowd. The media had made me self-conscious about racism. I detect arrogance and slow-footedness of sales clerks. At lunch, in the Faculty Club, I am not charmed when colleagues compliment me for not having a 'singsong' accent. I am tired of being complimented for qualities of voice, education, bearing, appearance, that are not extraordinary (169).

Yet, on the other hand, when as a writer she wishes to be visible, she finds that she has no place in the 'nascent, aggressively nationalistic, and self-engrossed' literary world in Canada: 'Reviewers claim that my material deals with Indians usually in India, and because my publisher is American, my work is not interesting to Canadian writers and readers' (169–78). In the Canada of rigid boundaries and a petty, racist and post-colonial mentality, Mukherjee, a South Asian woman, writing about India in English, published from America feels multiply excluded.

If she is out of place in Canada, India proves scarcely to be better. Though she thinks 'going to India is simpler than going anywhere else, simpler even than staying in Montreal' (168), her narrative reveals how wrong she is. From the beginning, she feels a sense of terror and chaos, bordering on hysteria. This is India on the eve of the Emergency and Mukherjee shares her mother's

paranoia and apocalyptic vision. As she acknowledges in the end, after actually 'seeing a ghost':

> Some disaster could easily have occurred. I was glad I had left India, not because I wanted to avoid disaster but because I wanted to avoid the crippling prudence that comes with living too close to imminent disasters. The year in India had forced me to view myself more as an immigrant than an exile (284).

The force of the last sentence is unmistakable: what she has experienced in India has been dictated by her need to find coherence in her life. But not finding this coherence, this wholeness, she can only save herself through a double repudiation, of both Canada and India. From the vantage point of the present, the past must be continually readjusted. An exile is in forced separation from her culture, while an immigrant leaves for better prospects and life-choices. Meeting her old friends has shown Mukherjee the limitations of their lives as upper class women in India. Indeed, it is her part of the book which takes us into a claustrophobic and suffocatingly restricted world: she is glad not to be like Anjali, Rina, Kamala, Nirmal or Anju, each of whom is trying to survive and cope, in her own way, with the restricted life choices of women in India. The marriage of Jaya towards the end of the book merely reaffirms the old pattern that Mukherjee has escaped from.

Yet, we cannot help wondering if Mukherjee's tenuous insights will survive repudiation in the future. Mukherjee is convinced that her best option is to flee India but the reader is not equally convinced:

> I realized that for me there would be no more easy consolation through India. The India that I had carried as a talisman against icy Canada had not survived my accidental testings. I would return, of course, but in future visits India would become just another Asian country with too many agonies and too much passion, and I would be another knowledgeable but desolate tourist (285).

This volte-face is a little too neat, too clever. There seems to be a convenience if not expediency in her choices. What is presented as a moral preference, is actually revealed to be a practical preference. If cultures are packaged and labelled so handily, carried as talismans of protection against one another, what else but disillusionment and rejection awaits such categorization? Cultures are, perhaps, not meant to be construed in this manner at all; perhaps, the past ought not to be compartmentalized thus. But it is precisely the inability of the subject to negotiate such pressures that results in the kind of fragmentation

that Mukherjee represents and portrays. The inability to cope with cultural complexity, the longing for simple solutions, the desire to find safety in reductionism – these are the traits one sees in Mukherjee's fiction. It seems as if the writer is committing herself to an unending series of denials and exclusions, without hope of that wholeness, arrival, refuge and home that she craves. That is why, for subject matter she has little but the deprivations of her characters to write about. For the time being, though, the agenda that Mukherjee invents for herself includes breaking out of the stereotype of an Indian English writer: 'Even more than other writers, I must learn to astonish, even to shock' (287). Such a promise is amply borne out of by her later fiction, a recurring trope of which is an Asian woman revelling in the sexual and economic freedom of America, not stopping even at murder to free themselves from whatever obstructs or oppresses them.

Mukherjee's narrative ends with some brave words: 'What died, that year in India, was my need for easy consolation. What has survived is the stubbornness to go on' (287). *Survival*. The great Canadian theme has come back to haunt Mukherjee. Certainly, her conclusion brings us back to it. In Mukherjee's rejection of India and determination to go on we thus find a surprising reaffirmation of a quintessential Canadian theme.

But if Mukherjee is not at home in Canada or, as she discovers during this trip, in India, Blaise is not comfortably Canadian either. As he is at pains to point out in *Resident Alien* he is the 'only Canadian writer born in Fargo, North Dakota' (165). Son of a French–Canadian father and an Anglo–Canadian mother, Blaise has had a rather itinerant existence when growing up. As Catherine Sheldrick Ross points out, Blaise 'moved thirty times before the eighth grade and attended twenty-five different schools' (3). He lived in Alabama, Florida, Cincinnati and Pittsburg, before enrolling in Denison University in Granville, Ohio, for his undergraduate studies in geology. He then went to the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he met Bharati. As Ross puts it, 'Blaise himself has been a man on the move for most of his life' (3) and this experience of dislocation and displacement is reflected in many of his works. 'In fact', in Ross's words, 'the typical Blaise character is a compulsive border-crosser' (*Ibid.*) Later, with Mukherjee, he too moves back to the US after spending several years in Canada, his parent's country.

The Indo–Canadian encounters in the book, in other words, contain both arrivals and departures. For Blaise, coming to India is an arrival, while for Mukherjee it is a departure. In her text containing her experiences as an Indian writer living abroad, we find a certain version of Canada. It would be nice to end on the converse note of finding India in a visiting Canadian writer's book. Indeed, it is through Clark Blaise's narrative that we receive our India afresh – whether it is the finely observed texture of life in the commercial capital of

India, Bombay, or the subtle nuances of our first metropolis of culture, Calcutta. Blaise's sympathy for India's contradictions and multiplicities enables us to perceive ourselves anew, often in ways which are surprising and enlivening. In the process, both Canada and India are extended if not reinvented. The Canadian mosaic is enriched by a new tile, while yet another traveller to India helps rediscover and reinterpret our culture.

When the European nations went searching for India, they found Canada. Today, when I went looking for Canada, I found India, not only in the writings of Mukherjee, an Indian living in Canada, but in Blaise, a Canadian visiting India. The world of redefined boundaries offers startling and unexpected insights: looking at our Other, we often find ourselves and looking for ourselves, we often find our Other. Looking far, we discover something very near, and looking very near we discover something very far. In DNC we see a practical demonstration of this thesis because here Indian English and Canadian literature overlap, interact, and converge into one another, before diverging again. The book, thus, itself becomes a trope for the Indo–Canadian encounter. Yet, as I have tried to show, this Indo–Canadian book is, in many ways, neither about Canada or India, but about a third country that lurks as the preferred alternative to both, the United States, to which both the writers will eventually repair.

# 9

# *THE GOLDEN GATE* AND THE QUEST FOR SELF-REALIZATION

What Vikram Seth says of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* can be said with equal justification about his book *The Golden Gate* – 'like champagne/ Its effervescence stirs my brain' (5.5).[1] This wonderful artefact, 'tour de force of tour de forces' (John Hollander), 'the Great California Novel' (Gore Vidal on dust-jacket), 'the perfect book of the 1980's' (publisher's blurb)—in 594, fourteen-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter – is certainly, to use a phrase from *The New York Times* review, 'a splendid achievement' (quoted in Leslie, 4). Indeed, *The Golden Gate* has generally received high praise as a zesty, trendy, scintillating and warm portrayal of modern Californian life, 'an up-to-date tale of San Francisco's "Yuppiedom"' (Ionnone, 54).[2]

In this chapter I shall look at the early reception of the novel to argue that *The Golden Gate,* much more than these things, is a sort of enquiry into the meaning of life in the contemporary world; that it is, above all, a book about love, pacifism, tolerance and compassion.[3] What emerges is not a celebration of Yuppiedom, but a severe critique and rejection of it. In short, I find the

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[1] Seth, Vikram, *The Golden Gate,* Faber, London, 1986; all quotations are cited by chapter and stanza numbers as given in the text.

[2] Reviews of the book include *The Atlantic Magazine,* May 1986, p. 99; Balliet, Whitney, *The New Yorker,* 14 July 1986, p. 82; Hollinghurst, Alan, *TLS*, 4 July 1986, p. 733; Ionnone, Carl, *Commentary,* September, 1986, pp. 54–5; Leslie, Jacques, *SPAN,* November 1986, p. 2; *New York Times Book Review,* 11 May 1986, p. 11; *Newsweek,* 14 April 1986 p. 107; Raja Rao, R, *New Quest,* November–December, 1986 p. 365; Zimir, Mary, *Library Journal,* July 1986, p. 111; References are included in the text.

[3] The subsequent criticism on the book has not, in my opinion, engaged sufficiently with this aspect of the book. See, for instance, 'No Golden Gate for Indian English Poetry? Reading Vikram Seth's Novel in Verse in the Context of Indian Poetry in English' by Tabish Khair in G J V Prasad's edited collection of essays on Seth. Also see Mala Pandurang's third chapter, '*The Golden Gate* and the Yuppies of Silicon Valley: A Critique of the Hypermodern,' in her book on Seth, which does touch on this aspect of the novel, but not in sufficient detail or depth.

book anti-materialistic and, ultimately, 'spiritual' in the values that it propounds. And, despite its 'slender' plot, 'sketchy and flat' characters, and ideas and themes derived 'wholly from the arsenal of contemporary liberal orthodoxies' (Ionnone, 54) *The Golden Gate* is not a pop pastiche, offering a scaled-down, recycled, and shallow interpretation of life; instead its vision is serious, ever sombre, averring that life is tough and unless we are tolerant, loving, sensitive to each other, and forgiving, we will be crushed. It is this underlying concern that I here loosely term as the 'quest for self-realization'; every character in his or her own way, strives to come to grips with life, to find love, happiness, peace of mind, in a word to realize himself or herself in terms of a larger moral and spiritual order. Thus, by the end of the book, it is easily possible to define, broadly, Seth's ideology and prescription for a 'good' life on this beleaguered planet.

At the outset it is necessary to understand the technique of the unfolding of Seth's vision. In *The Golden Gate* the characters become the vehicles of this unfolding. There seems to be a causal relation between what the characters believe and what happens to them. In this way through their inner and outer conflicts, the value system of the novel is worked out. This point has been made by Carl Ionnone in one of the most perceptive commentaries on the book: 'characters are defined in terms of where they stand on the issues, with life's sweetest secrets yielding to those on the correct side of the correct causes' (Ionnone, 55). I would modify this statement just a bit before proceeding with my analysis: those who are not on the 'correct side of the correct causes' are corrected by life itself and hence the moral standards that form the underlying framework of the book are projected to be universal and absolute.

There are five main characters in *The Golden Gate*, all of them interconnected: John Brown; his girlfriend, Elisabeth Dorati (Liz); his friend and later Liz's husband, Phil Weiss; Liz's Brother Ed Dorati; and Janet Hayakawa, John's friend and 'good angel'. Besides, there are two children, Phil's son Paul, and Chuck, the son of Phil's neighbours, the Lamonts. Equally important to the plot are some non-human players too – an unforgettable mean tabby, Charlemagne, Liz's pet; in addition, Cuff and Link, Janet's two cats, and, finally, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ed's pet iguana. These constitute the Californian cast of Seth's novel.

John is the central character and it is in what happens to him that my thesis is best illustrated. His life can be divided into three phases: his initial loneliness, his relationship with Liz, and his life afterwards. The novel opens with John Brown's problem:

> One evening as he walked across
> Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss

> Of a red Frisbee almost brained him.
> He thought, 'if I died, who'd be sad?
> Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?
> Would anybody?' (1.1)

The questions certainly suggest a spiritual malaise because John seems to be questioning the worth and the meaning of his life. This is significant because John is only twenty-six, a graduate of Berkeley, highly-paid, respected, tall, handsome, well-dressed – he even owns a Peugeot – in other words, he is a male WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) Yuppie (Young Urban Professional). What is more, he works in 'Defence,' that is helping to build bombs and missiles. And so, John the 'Poor little rich boy' (1.31), 'senses his life has run to seed' (1.4): 'He feels an urgent riptide drawing/him far out, where, caught in the kelp/Of loneliness, he cries for help' (1.2). As he confesses to his friend Janet:

> I'm young, employed, healthy, ambitious
> Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed.
> But all my symptoms are pernicious. (1.23)

Hence, John, who apparently has everything, is still deeply unhappy.

John's sickness is diagnosed pretty quickly. The fact is that he is very lonely. Jan, his troubleshooting, sympathetic friend-cum-therapist, is prompt with the cure as well, 'You need a lover, John, I think' (1.23). But as the novel goes on to show, a lover does not solve John's problem though his relationship with Liz eventually helps him understand himself. John's problem is not external, so much as internal. Unless, he can change himself and his personality he will continue to invite unhappiness. We learn much of this in the first chapter itself.

Seth gives us the psychological and emotional reasons for John's condition. First, his lack of rootedness in his family: 'No family/Cushions his solitude' (1.6). His mother is dead and his father, who is English, retired, and now lives in his native Kent, 'Rarely responds to letters sent/ (If rarely) by his transatlantic/ Offspring' (1.6). This bit of information is used again in the novel to explain John's personality: 'a childhood lack of love' as Phil puts it later (9.37). This use of pop psychology or 'dollar book Freud' is completely characteristic of the novel.

Secondly, his job in the high tech, high stress computer and electronics industry doesn't help:

> Silicon Valley
> Lures to ambition's ulcer alley

Young graduates with sirens screams
Of power and wealth beyond their dreams,
Ejects the lax, and drives the driver,
Burning their candles at both ends.
Thus files takes precedence over friends,
Labour is lauded, leisure riven.
John kneels bareheaded and unshod
Before the Chip, a jealous God. (1.9)

The critique of Yuppie materialism is clear here: success, ambition, power, money – the values of the marketplace gain priority over friendship, leisure, love – the matters of the heart. So much so that the almighty computer chip replaces God. We begin to see that John is not unhappy in spite of being rich, ambitious, successful, but perhaps *because* of it. The very factors which contribute to material well-being seem to cause spiritual blight. This is, of course, a very old opposition revived again by Seth in the context of the highly stressful working environment of the Silicon Valley, where brilliant minds get 'burnt out' by a lifestyle that proves too fast for them. No wonder, in contrast to the present, John wistfully 'thinks back to his days at college/To Phil, to Berkeley friends, to nights/When the pursuit of grades and knowledge/Floundered in beery jokes and fights' (1.9).

Third, John's attitude to women is reductive and demeaning. This is revealed in a chance phrase whose significance is only underscored by the length and the seriousness with which Jan treats it. Agreeing that he is lonely, John asks, 'Well what's the way/To hook chicks?' In response, 'Angrily and sadly/Jan looks at him. You'll blow it badly/Till you clean up your Pigspeak act' (1.26). Jan doesn't consider this 'a/Harmless joke' nor 'A venial linguistic tumor' (1.27) and concludes with "To hook a chick" – /Such porcine lingo makes me sick' (1.26). Of course, John apologizes and the issue is dropped. But much later in the book, after Liz and John split up, and he turns with vengeance to one-night stands, cynically picking up partners at the mixed singles' bar, we discover along with Janet that John has not yet learned to respect women and to treat them like human beings first and foremost:

As John surveys his singles heaven,
Her heart is irked by his hard-boiled
Slick patter: '… That one gets a seven…
That's Martha: well-stacked but shop-soiled …
Wow! Check the goods out on that cutie… (11.40)

Once again, Janet has to rescue John from himself.

Another important hint of John's personality is also revealed in the first chapter: his impatience and self-centredness. When he calls Jan for help he is peeved that he has to talk to an answering machine (1.18). Later, waiting at 'Shu Jing' for Jan, he is irritable when she is late: 'I've waited half an hour, blast her!' (1.21). Though he expects others to respond to his needs instantly, he does not usually apply the same standards of his own attitude to others. For instance, when, in the seventh heaven of happiness with Liz, Jan needs him, he cannot find any time to see her (Jan) (6.37). This impatience with others is best seen in his intolerance to other people's views and lives, especially of those who are different from him. When Jan jokingly asks if there are 'Any nice guys' that might interest him, he wonders whether 'She's had too much' to drink (1.28). Jan's reply is, 'Well, don't knock what you haven't tried' (1.28). Similarly, when she suggests that he put a personal ad in the newspaper, he flares up. She says, 'Johnny Boy, your mind needs cleaning/Of the debris of prejudice' and 'Its definition is, states Janet,/ "Judging a thing before it is tried"' (1.33). As it happens, it is through the 'tacky' agency of a lonely-hearts ad that John finds Liz. And his complete intolerance of Phil's homosexual affair with Ed is one of the causes of his losing Liz.

The second phase of John's life, that which concerns his relationship with Liz, progresses through several chapters. Liz is a Yuppie like John, a practising attorney, ex-Stanford Law School, twenty-seven, blonde, blue-eyed, 'well-rounded' (2.27), tall, and 'fresh faced' (2.35). To all appearances they are perfectly matched and fall in love immediately (2.36–57). They decide to move in together and rent out the first floor of 'A sedate/Queen Anne Victorian' house (6.7–10). Their housewarming party is a great success (4.1–30). And on the morning after, John's happiness seems to be complete: in addition to 'health;/Well-paid, congenial employment;/A house; a modicum of wealth;/ [...] A Burberry trench coat; a Peugeot' he has that something extra which makes everything meaningful:

> In short,
> In life's brief game to be a winner
> A man must have ... Oh yes, above
> All else, of course, someone to love. (6.13)

However, John's happiness proves to be short-lived, ending in a traumatic separation from Liz.

As we can gather from the book, there are three main factors which contribute to the break-up of this relationship. The first, which is quite

hilarious, is Charlemagne, the fearsome, jealous cat. He takes an intransigent dislike for John, scratching his trousers, gnawing the telephone cord when his boss is on the line, tearing to shreds a report entitled *Bipartite Para-Models of Missile Flight* (6.16), urinating near his head when he is in bed (6.22), and finally disembowelling John's custom-made Polish pigskin briefcase (6.25). Things get to such a pass that John threatens 'it's that cat or me' (9.1). Janet, who once again plays counsellor, suggests, with all-Californian wisdom/ weirdness, a cat psychiatrist (6.30). But nothing seems to work and John, sulkily begins to think 'That – more than me – Liz loves the cat.' (9.7)

More important that the cat is the crucial event of the book that takes place in Chapter 7 and the issues that surrounds it. John, as we have seen, works for 'Defence', that is in defence-related research. His former room-mate at Berkeley and close friend Phil, too worked for a similar company, called Datatronics, before he dropped out and joined the peace movement. Phil, in many ways, is a direct antithesis of John. He's twenty-eight, divorced, and 'a good atheist Jew' (3.17). He has renounced his Yuppie status and become a 'peacenik.' Homely (3.4) and balding (3.2, 3.3), he now drives a second-hand Volkswagen instead of his Ford Capri, which was sold off when his circumstances altered (3.2) (compare this with John's WASP, Yuppie good looks and Peugeot). Phil spends a good deal of his time in bringing up Paul and living the natural way. (3.2). John, on the other hand, doesn't appreciate the peace movement: 'His politics have strongly, slowly,/Rigidified' (2.14). John and Phil have a showdown over the issue during the party. John cannot believe that Phil:

> ...the whiz kid of computers,
> Beloved of bosses as of tutors,
> The author of that learned tract
> On guidance systems – could in fact
> Blow your career – and for dumb slogans. (4.17)

Phil's one line reply tells us all that he's about: 'To save the world – what's dumb in that?' (4.17). While Phil waxes eloquent about the threat of nuclear holocaust, world annihilation, and the futility of it all, John finds himself more and more alienated.

> Phil's amicable eccentricity
> Unsettles John now that it's come
> To rest a bit too close to home. (4.16)

They have another discussion, this time on more fundamental issues, in Chapter 6, when Phil goes to ask Liz for some legal advice before their

demonstration. As Phil had realized about him earlier, 'John doesn't like his totems shaken./Before I've threatened him, he fires' (4.16) – John's attack gets belligerent and personal. He points out the ills of the Soviet system – its totalitarianism, lack of democracy, suppression of human rights, torture of dissidents, etc. (6.42-5) but Phil's arguments, foreshadowing Father O'Hare's speech which forms a major chunk of Chapter 7, are on behalf of humanity. He refuses the 'us vs them' thesis, pleading that nuclear annihilation threatens all mankind (6.46-7).

Chapter 7 has the best claims to be considered the climax of the book. The narrator himself pitches his might behind the peace movement, giving us a homily against hate and warning us about the impending disasters of a nuclear winter (7.1–3). Those who build these weapons – 'This butchering brainspawn' – come in for severe criticism (7.6–7):

> When something's technically attractive,
> You follow the conception through,
> That's all. What if you leave a slew
> Of living dead, of radioactive
> 'Collateral damage' in its wake?
> It's just a job, for heaven's sake. (7.7)

Surely, the central public theme of the book is peace. Father O'Hare in his long speech plays the role of the chorus (7.15–34), while groups of protesters prepare to court arrest in front of Lungless Labs (a substitute for 'heartless,' perhaps?), the hub of Defence Research. What Father O'Hare advocates is very close to *satyagraha,* a nonviolent mass movement against the mounting threat of a senseless destruction (7.26). His main thrust is that the 'Killing is dying':

> There is no victory, no survival,
> And no defence, no place to hide,
> No limit, and indeed, no rival
> In this exhaustive fratricide. (7.30)

Further:

> *Qua warranto?* By what authority
> I ask you in the wounds of Christ,
> Does strength confer superiority
> Over God's earth? (7.32)

He concludes,

> With Deuteronomy's plain prose.
> Here it is: 'I have set before you
> Life and death… therefore choose life.' (7.34)

The most interesting development in this chapter from the standpoint of the plot is the surprise participation of Liz with Charlemagne in the rally with the sign, *Cats and attorneys are disarming./ Why aren't we all?* (7.13).

Clearly, John is on the wrong side of this cause. Ranged against him are not only Phil, but also Liz, Ed and Janet – all the other major characters. Liz, not only joins the demonstration, but gives a short speech on behalf of the innocent flora and fauna which would also be destroyed through 'our silliness and hate' (7.45). She even succeeds in defending Phil and others arrested despite strong disapproval from the 'senior partners' of the staid law firm of Cobb and Kearny where she works (9.29–30). Ed is already a pacifist (4.22), though he believes in changing himself first before trying to change others (8.2). Jan, too, is reluctant to accept John's view that 'these psychotic/Peaceniks have no respect for law' (12.18). She knows of the ravages of war because her grandfather died in an internment camp during the war. Finally, though John himself clings to 'The assuring axiom that the more/The bombs, the less the chance of war' (2.17), he has himself begun to reconsider his position towards the end of the book:

> He sees
> With a dark clarity, that either
> The bombs will fall or not, and neither
> Alternative gives cause for pride. (12.17)

John's difference with Liz on this issue is, thus, one of the main causes for their break-up. When on the brink of marrying Liz, he begins to brood:

> Phil's salvos at High Nuclear Tech –
> And Liz's legal volunteering –
> Oppress John dimly, mind and heart…(10.15)

The final issue over which John clashes with Liz and the others is Phil's and Ed's homosexual relationship. While John gloats with Liz that he can get his good buddy Phil 'hitched up' with Sue (the youngest of the three Doratis) (4.11), ironically, it is Ed that Phil is with that night. Phil who was married six years to Claire and has a son, is one of those people who 'made it with a guy at college./(Well, once or twice)' (4.47). Ed doesn't

like girls and has more overt homosexual tendencies. The night of the party, because Phil is too drunk to drive home, Ed invites him to share his bed (4.29). However, theirs is a topsy-turvy relationship because Ed, a confirmed Catholic, is wracked by guilt and repeatedly tries to deny his desires (4.45–54; 5.18; 5.36; 8.19–37). Just before the peace-march both Phil and Ed visit John and Liz. The latter, with a forensic eye, observes that they 'both wore the same mismatched socks' (9.21). She guesses what has happened (6.49), while John finds out only much later, after Ed and Phil have finally split up, who Phil's lover was:

> '…Someone I know? 'Yes.' 'So I've seen her.'
> 'Not quite, but – ' 'Sue' 'no'. 'Rose?' 'No' '*Jan?*'
> 'You're on the wrong track.' 'Not Rowena?'
> 'No.' 'Phil I give up' 'Ed's the man.'
> 'Ed?' 'Yes.' 'You don't mean Ed.' 'Yes.' 'Jesus!'
> 'Don't gape at me – I'm not a rhesus
> Monkey with AIDS.' 'Oh, Jesus, Phil!
> You mean that… It's not possible…'
> John stammers, shakes his head; then shivering,
> Emits a small bleat of disgust
> At this malformed and sickening lust,
> And turns away; while Philip, quivering,
> Feels his fists clench and disengage
> In insult and astonished rage. (9.14)

At this point, it's not clear who should feel 'astonished rage' – whether John at Phil or Phil at John or the readers at Phil or John or Vikram Seth – it all depends on where one stands on an issue like this. Indeed this is one of the problems of the book because Phil's homosexuality is only brief and not fully developed or acknowledged. He goes on to marry, in a span of a few weeks, Liz herself – something which only the Californian logic of the book makes plausible. Paired off with Sue, loved Ed, and married Liz, Phil really lives up to his remark earlier in the book, 'I haven't yet met a Dorati/ I didn't like…' (4.32). The point is that in Phil's marriage with Liz, the norm is restored, almost casually. Would Seth have permitted Phil and Ed lived happily ever after, thus affirming his recognition of a separate identity for homosexuals? Most certainly today, but over twenty years back, at least Indian audiences may not have been entirely ready. Contrarily, Phil's bisexuality is still threatening. What if he were to take another male lover after marrying Liz? Such troublesome questions are not broached in the book. Critics accuse Seth of pussyfooting on the issue of homosexuality, simplifying it in his attempt to integrate it into his scheme of

things (see Ionnone, 56).

The point that Seth is making, as I see it however, is not one of the homosexuality, but of flexibility and tolerance. It is John's intolerance versus Liz's acceptance that is emphasized. In fact Liz comes all the way to Phil's car to apologize and ends up going for a drive with him. They discuss John's obtuseness and Liz hints, for the first time, at her reservations over their relationship:

> Well, love's fun
> At first … but living with someone
> Your love can be less than appealing
> If everything's just great in bed
> Yet nothing's shared inside your head. (9.36)

John's ailment is diagnosed:

> John's not vicious –
> Or unaffectionate or unkind.
> He's generous, he's not malicious.
> It's that at times he's almost blind. (9.38)

The way the book operates, the first three lines obviously mean that there's still some hope for John, but the fourth line presages bad times ahead for him.

This blindness of John is to cost him his relationship with Liz. When at the Doratis' as a prelude to his acceptance into the family as their son-in-law, in a moment of insane jealously, John accuses Liz of having an affair with Phil when he sees a fat envelope from him addressed to her. That to Liz is the last straw, distraught as she is with the recent news of her mother's cancer:

> Liz cries, 'I love you-don't abuse me –
> John, I can't take it – don't accuse me
> Of having an affair with Phil –
> Don't drive me to it – or I will.' (19.38)

The 'sick repentance seeping/Into John's heart' (10.38) is too late; he leaves 'self-damned, self-banished' (10.40).

To finish Pilgrim John's progress quickly, Phil and Liz marry. John, his life now completely poisoned by hate, refuses all gestures of rapprochement. But in the golden world of *The Golden Gate* all is not yet lost. In a surprising second chance, finds a reprieve and love in Jan, once again. Jan plans a party to bring all the friends together, but is killed on the way in an automobile

accident. John is devastated. Haunted by memories of the only true love he ever had, he becomes the complete opposite of the handsome, Yuppie figure that he cuts at the beginning of the book. 'In a crumpled suit, unshaved' (13.42) he walks about dazed. Now, Phil and Liz are the new unit that upholds the norms of the book. They have a nine-pound baby boy exactly nine months after their wedding – the hurry is to oblige Liz's dying mother with the pleasure of a grandchild. The boy is named 'John', and John is invited to be the godfather. Phil and Liz also constitute the prototype of the favoured new family that emerges after the turmoil of the book. Along with Jan, the Lamonts, Phil's neighbours, Matt and Joan, who were giving her a ride, have also been killed. Their orphaned son Chuck is now taken over by Phil and Liz. He becomes John's understudy as he learns to cope with the inexplicable death of his parents as John must Janet's death. Not only Chuck, but Janet's two cats, Cuff and Link, also find a home with Phil and Liz. The only one left out of this all embracing family is John, who egged on by Janet's spirit, relents in the very last stanza of the book (13.52). The marriage of Phil and Liz, thus, bridges all the opposites that the book has fabricated thus far. Liz the reformed Yuppie, still working for Cobb and Kearny, is joined to Phil the dropout, peacenik. She is beautiful, rich; he plain and poor. She is Catholic; he Jewish. She's heterosexual ('square'); he's bisexual ('weird'). This new family has a bit of all the different groups in the novel: a bit of WASP in Paul (Claire's legacy); a bit of the Japanese Janet in her cats; and as already seen, a bit of Yuppie, peacenik, and homosexual. Finally, even John makes a move to join them and be on the right side of the California of the 1980s – the new melting pot and all embracing orphanage rolled into one, the microcosm not only of the best of the US, but, as Seth would have it, of our brave new world itself.

With this John's progress is complete. It is now easily possible to map out the various other characters in terms of the moral and ideological, not to mention ethnic, coordinates of the book. The two WASPs, John and Claire, Phil's snooty Eastern wife, banished from sunny California upon her desertion of Phil, and Paul, come in for the worst criticism. As Ionnone observes, 'The presumed emotional aloofness of the Anglo-Saxon appears, indeed, to be a cardinal sin of the West in the eyes of the Indian-born Seth' (55). Liz, another Yuppie, however of Italian descent, is much more elastic. After all, she has a strong and secure family background and her parents, vine growers and wine makers, are close to the earth. She comes out 'correctly' on the major issues such as the peace movement and homosexuality; what is more she dumps the inflexible John and finds happiness with Phil. Phil, 'serves as an adorable foil to a poker-spined Anglo society' (Ionnone, 54): he is not only Jewish, but atheist, bisexual, and most importantly, a peacenik. Ed, with his Catholic guilt and obsession with sin, doesn't measure up too well; however being a

homosexual and a Dorati, he rates higher than John; moreover, the plot demands that he make way for the more 'normal' and productive relationship between Liz and Phil. After all, Mrs Dorati, Liz's mother, wants grandchildren prancing on her knees, and Phil and Ed can't give her that. To say the least, in a novel about peace and the preservation of the earth, the human race must go on. But the character who emerges as the most favourable is the oriental Janet Hayakawa who is giving, selfless, and saves John repeatedly, even after her death.[4] Most important, she is the humblest of the characters, the least 'me-centred' – the opposite pole of the John. No wonder, she's an artist and a musician – far from being a Yuppie.

So much for the people, now for the values. Love comes to be the most prized principle of all at the individual level. We have already seen John's plight, twice loser in love. But similar is the situation of Phil, Liz, Ed and Jan; all of them, at some point or the other are extremely lonely and depressed. Each yearns for a fulfilling relationship and all of them go on to find it, be it momentarily. Love, not passion, is the greatest of all. The passion between John and Liz, though often dubbed as love, ends in a disappointing incompatibility. Similarly, Ed's and Phil's affair is short-lived. Lower down the scale, cynical lust such as John pursued in his one night stands, is to be discarded altogether. After love; friendship, which is another version of love, is treasured. By the end of the novel, it becomes most crucial that all the friends alive, Phil, Liz, and John get together again. Then, tolerance, acceptance and flexibility – a trio that is much required if any Californian society is to flourish at all. We are all different, the book is trying to remind us. If we can't tolerate each other, how can we survive? The characters who are the most relaxed are the most likeable and successful socially. Phil, who simply lets a number of things happen around him including children, cats, neighbours and lovers is, of course, the prime example. The Doratis are not too far behind. Money, material well-being, take second place to these human values – indeed they are taken for granted. No one is poor in the novel; no one is denied any of the basic necessities. But once these are assured, the human values must take priority, the novel suggests. Male chauvinism, jingoism and ultra-conservatism are frowned upon. The nastier negatives such as racism, religious bigotry, and class consciousness are entirely absent. Last but not the least, a frank even hedonistic enjoyment of life is celebrated – another Californian trait? Food, wine, sex and the other good things of life must be enjoyed for that is what they are for, says Seth through his characters. Hence, Ed's guilt over sex is

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[4] To be fair to Janet and to Seth, and 'To adjust a portrait too one-sided' (3.25), it must be admitted that Jan too has faults – not venial ones, for instance she drinks too much, but moral flaws. She can't stand Phil and entirely blames him for what happened between him and Claire (4.9–10).

frowned upon: as Phil puts it: 'What's wrong with sex? The more the better/If you like someone' (4.51). The fruits of the vine are also imbibed with alacrity; literally scores of these vivifying potages are mentioned in the novel including scotch, bourbon, gin, brandy, beer, sherry, port, Bordeaux, champagne, Chablis, cabernet, Manhattan, Bloody Mary, Pernod and so on. And good food is eaten too many times to be mentioned. On the other hand, the most important social value is, of course, peace on Earth. And this has already been discussed extensively.

Does all this mean that the fate of the characters is facile and preordained, that the book's straightjacketed morality makes the action predictable? Yes, but the last chapters, 11–13, lift the book from out of the realms of pop culture and give it an unexpected depth. What we see is not John paying a settled price for his already explained floutings of the moral law – what he in fact suffers is totally disproportionate to his real or imagined failings. The death of Janet, as of Matt and Joan Lamont, and later Liz's mother, are not strictly speaking required. But suddenly, swiftly, and unpredictably, life sweeps away the characters' sand-castle securities, leaving them broken and shell-shocked. It is this disproportionate catastrophe that makes John's reversal of fortune convincing and almost tragic. The ending is far from facile or fairy tale like. Janet's death completely shatters the old, flawed, self-centred personality of John so that the new man can emerge. A humility is forced upon him that is not acquired but essential, even existential. The orphaned Chuck must learn to cope with this tough reality in which loved ones are snatched away untimely, while others, elders, die slowly before our eyes. John learns to make peace with life and surrender himself to its flow; with this his quest for self-realization – and this chapter – reach their logical closure (13.52).

The seriousness of Seth's vision in the novel, bordering almost on the spiritual, has not been fully recognized and appreciated. Even in his later works, what critics tend to emphasize is the complex and varied social portrayal as in *A Suitable Boy* (1994) or the virtuosity of style as in *An Equal Music.* But even in the former, Lata, the protagonist, seeks a higher truth and reality, that she comes closer to attaining by making 'correct' moral and material choices. Modelled on his own mother, Leila Seth, Lata lays the foundations of an exceptional career and family life through her intelligence and persistence. For an Indian woman before independence, hers too is a remarkable pilgrim's progress. Similarly, in *An Equal Music* (1999), the love story is a painful and intense journey towards a greater realization or higher truth. When we return to Seth's oeuvre in the light of this underlying quest for self-realization so well-defined in his best loved work, *The Golden Gate*, we can see that he is a writer of much greater thematic import and weight than we might notice at first.

# 10

# JOURNEY TO ITHACA: An Epistle on the Fiction of the 1980s and 1990s

The title of this chapter refers to at least four texts. The first two texts are suggested by Ithaca, the city of the birth and return of the great Greek hero, Odysseus, the protagonist of the Homeric epic, *Odyssey*, and thus brings to mind the great classical text. It is also the title of a famous poem by C P Cavafy (1863–1933), a major Greek poet. The poem, over the years, has become a commonplace metaphor for the importance of journeys over arrivals. Especially in the Rae Delven translation, it has acquired a popular, even cultic following in the English speaking world, with celebrities such as Sean Connery reading it. It has also been quoted in full by the internationally best-selling novelist Paulo Coelho in his book *The Zahir: A Novel of Obssession* (2005). Coelho does not acknowledge that Anita Desai had used it earlier, in almost the same opening location of her novel, *Journey to Ithaca*, which is the principal concern of this chapter. But the phrase also refers to the title this very chapter in which I consider a reading of the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s (FEN) itself as a sort of journey to Ithaca, that is, an interesting expedition with a disappointing arrival. I call this chapter an epistle in the subtitle not because I consider it an extended, magisterial, authoritative, almost Biblical composition, but simply because in its earlier version it was actually written in the form of a letter.[1] To be very precise, it was dated 31 October 1995, more than thirteen years ago, for one of the first volumes on Indian English fiction of the 1980s and early 1990s.

By referring to the original form and context of the chapter, I wish to once again reflect on what it means to belong to 'another canon' so far as Indian English literature is concerned. To me this canon is 'another' in at least two

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[1] See *The Postmodern Indian Novel in English* edited by Viney Kirpal (1997), where it appeared; my thanks to Viney for allowing me to address her as my interlocutor. The volume went on to become a standard reference book for the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s.

senses of the word. First of all, it consists of not so well-known or even minor works but by major writers. If both the texts and the authors were minor, they would not be canonical. On the other hand, if both the texts and the authors were major, then they would not constitute an*other* canon. Therefore what makes these texts/authors special is that they are at once both major and minor, both significant, but at the same time, marginal(ized). These works, I believe, require careful study if we wish to understand not only major authors or their better known texts, but also the growth and development of Indian English literature itself. In some cases, both the works and their writers are not very well known, but even so I think that studying them is crucial to the larger project of making sense of Indian English literature. This is because these works at once, and sometimes paradoxically, exemplify both the strengths and weaknesses of this literature. Each of these works is 'outstanding' in the sense of being unusual, spectacular or different, in one way or another. But some of these works are also flawed in that, in the end, they do not fully achieve their potential. But the latter observation might actually be a generic feature of this literature.

What is true of the literature is also often true of its criticism. In this very chapter, I wish to depart from the more conventional practice of academic discourse in order to illustrate that our criticism, too, suffers from similar strengths and drawbacks as the primary works themselves. Formal experimentation in criticism, though, has lagged way behind that in the creative writing. When I first wrote this section, I was experimenting with how to get out of the discursive straitjacket of standard academics. I used to find it inhibiting and oppressive. This discourse, I believed was a received discourse in which our voices were seldom heard. Besides, it often precluded a free and informal flow of ideas. But apart from such larger ideological considerations, adopting this form was meant to circumvent certain drawbacks, inabilities or inadequacies, such as the lack of good libraries and bibliographical resources. Without these, it was difficult to construct a valid or persuasive argument, but did that mean that Indian academics ought to produce no criticism at all. We were fated to remain only teachers, never critics? I thought I needed a way to convey my insights and considered opinions even without the material resources needed for a standard academic paper. For instance, if some of the points that I wish to make here were to be put into a proper scholarly chapter, they would require a more elaborate and substantial kind of research than I felt equal to at that juncture. Finally, it seemed to me that FEN itself – amorphous, unsettled, evolving – was perhaps more amenable to a treatment in this more informal mode. That is why a 'letter' between two serious, informed, and concerned teachers (and students) of FEN, with a larger intended

audience listening in, would also be a suitable, if alternative, method of exchanging ideas. An*other* criticism for an*other* canon.

The original brief was to write on Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*. But as I was reading the book, I thought that some of my thoughts and observation might apply to a larger corpus of FEN. It is this that inspired my title. It seemed to me that an experience of reading this body of writing might resemble that of reading Desai's novel itself; furthermore, this type of experience is strongly prefigured in the Cavafy poem which gives Desai's book its title and forms one of its two epigraphs.

Before I go on to discuss Desai's novel specifically, I would like to make a few generalizations about FEN. What are its distinctive qualities and attributes? What makes it special? Below I outline some of these.

### Expansion

In the 1980s and 1990s, the authorship and readership of FEN grew exponentially. During this period I estimate that at least 150 new writers made their debuts, of which at least fifty are women. Thus, there is a huge expansion in the base of FEN. Perhaps, the most remarkable sign of this is the three generations of Indian English (IE) writers simultaneously active then. The big three, Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao, were all alive and productive. Then there was the next generation, made up of the likes of Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Finally, all the new writers, including Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, I Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and so on, who burst into fame in the 1980s.

### Increased International Visibility

FEN was no longer a local phenomenon. After Salman Rudhdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) it acquired a new international visibility and market. A large number of IE novelists began to be published abroad, commanding better and better royalties. The greatest success story of this decade was definitely Vikram Seth, whose *A Suitable Boy* (1993) got an advance of over a million pounds.

### Change in Self-Definition and Identity

After such great international success, FEN was no longer merely a hothouse cultural activity or even a national literature. It become globalized, an inter-cultural product, and almost a frontier literature. Of course, several of its practitioners remained confined to India, having no audiences outside because their publishers were Indian. Yet, there was always this possibility of breaking through into international recognition, sooner or later. At any rate, the best

known of these writers usually lived abroad, in metropolitan centres where their work was published. There emerged, thus, an entire cultural politics of literary 'stardom'; those who had made it versus those still languishing in the backwaters. A new commodificaiton of India for overseas markets also became evident. FEN, consequently, suffered from a crisis of legitimacy and authenticity at home.

## Boom in Indian Publishing

Parallel to the international expansion, Indian English fiction never had it so good in India. Many new publishers became active during this period. The chief of these is Penguin India, which turned ten years old in 1995. In the 1990s, it carved a unique place for itself in Indian publishing by discovering and publishing several new authors not just from India but the subcontinent. It has published almost every major Indian novelist (except Amitav Ghosh) which, it published for the first time in 2008 by bringing out an Indian edition of *Sea of Poppies*. Other publishers, old and new, tried to emulate its success. These include Rupa, HarperCollins India, Disha Books (an imprint of Orient Longman), Affiliated East West Publishers, and so on. Some of these even folded up or reappeared in newer avatars. Printing and production standards became better than ever because of digital technology. Books were available more widely and there was been a resurgence of bookshops. In fact, newer, larger, department style book chains emerged. For instance, Landmark, Crossword, Oxford Bookstore, and other such chains, modelled on Borders (UK), Barnes and Noble (US) or Chapters (Canada). These stores, which sell a lot of other merchandise and often include coffee shops, are very different from the old colonial chain stores like Higginbothams or Wheelers, which made most of their money from small kiosks at railway stations. Yet, for a country of over a billion, such improvements are shockingly inadequate, even if they are in themselves quite significant. A sale of just 10,000 copies still constitutes a bestseller in fiction. The market is, thus, very, very tiny. Cheap Indian reprints of foreign bestsellers continue to dominate the paperback market. A Sidney Sheldon or Robert Ludlum title may easily sell 40,000 copies while a new Indian English novel will struggle to go through an initial print run of 2000. The only difference was the emergence of *desi* pulp in authors like Shobha De.

## New Genres

With an increase in the market, new genres and lines found a demand. In this period, in addition to literary fiction, popular fiction, romances, children's writing and thrillers, all written by Indian authors began to be published. For the first time in FEN we could speak of popular versus serious writing, say,

Shobha De versus Anita Desai or Ashok Banker versus Raja Rao. Also for the first time, Indian English films and TV serials began to be written and produced.

## New Directions in Form and Content

Again, *Midnight's Children* may be seen as a convenient point of departure, popularizing if not inaugurating a new way of writing India. Fabulism, magic realism, fantasy, metafiction, postmodernism, and so on, suddenly came to dominate the landscape of FEN. These trends, though prevalent abroad for decades, had a delayed impact on India. But when they did arrive, they came with a bang. Now, towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it seems to me, that these modes of writing are tiring, having lost their initial novelty and attractiveness. Perhaps, we are now looking forward to a return of more traditional, realistic patterns of fiction. But for FEN, they were new and exciting discoveries.

## Narratives of Disintegration

Arguably, one way of summing up what Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* stands for is deconstruction. Rushdie and writers who followed him break down or subvert the master narratives of the nation which an earlier generation of novelists so carefully constructed. In those heady days of nationalism, fiction played an important role in giving voice and expression to the needs and hopes of the people in search of a new nation. Later, several smaller stories began to undermine the claims and visions of these grand narratives. Rushdie and his school are largely deconstructive in their approach because they portray the discontents of the national project. Their fragmentary narratives celebrate minor or minority experiences or the breakdown of the big story of India. The experience of Anglo-Indians (I Allan Sealy), Parsis (Boman Desai), expatriates (Hanif Kureishi), Westernised Indians (Upamanyu Chatterjee), immigrants (Bharati Mukherjee), and other such 'marginalized' people became the focus of FEN. Perhaps, thematically and technically speaking, this was the most important aspect of FEN.

## Women's Writing

Of all the 'minorities', the most important are women. A separate fictional territory has been mapped by them. Whereas men's narratives tend to be large, social, picaresque, flamboyant, historical, political and basically exterior, those of women are more often interior, personal, more modest, domestic, subtle and sensitive. There are, of course, exceptions, but never before has the experience of women been mapped in such variety and finesse as in FEN.

To sum up, I think that there are basically two ways of talking about FEN – via the language of continuity or via the language of change. As I have tried to show above, while there are significant changes, there are also continuities. Yet, it is obvious that the language of ruptures is the favoured mode of defining FEN. Perhaps, market forces favour radical departures, prodigious breaks and unprecedented originality, even if these actually don't exist. That's why the new generation has all but displaced the middle and older generations of writers. Few people wish to discuss the work of Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand these days. Similarly, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya or Arun Joshi have completely gone out of favour.

## II

I think I should now turn to *Journey to Ithaca*, the text which gives this chapter its name.[2] Its central movement is anticipated in Desai's earlier novels. Protagonists seek a solution to their problems; they feel that the solution lies in discovering some lost essence or precious experience, which they once had, usually as children; they undertake a journey to recover that golden time, but after what is a difficult voyage, they end up disappointed, disillusioned, bereft (in the earlier texts) or reconciled (in the later novels). In the later novels, the disappointment is often accompanied by the awakening of new knowledge. Seen as a concomitant to real, adult maturity, it almost accorded a positive value.

Though such a pattern is seen right from *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Desai's very first novel, it becomes fully established in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975). In the latter, Sita, the protagonist, has already borne four children; now, with a fifth in her womb, she suffers from a deep spiritual crisis and depression. Why should she bring yet another life into this world which is so meaningless and brutal? To find answers she goes to Manori, a semi-magical island where her father presided as a healer, guru and legendary wise man. Slowly and painfully, she reexamine all that had seemed so wonderful, so illuminating in her childhood only to discover that much of it was dubious or ambiguous. Finally, she realizes that her father was in fact a charlatan, a fake. In the end, a disillusioned Sita waits for her uninteresting husband to take her back to Bombay, the fate of her unborn baby still uncertain. The carefully

[2] Neither the early response nor the subsequent analysis of this novel has been very satisfying. Of the number of books on Desai, most appeared before the novel was published. Only two, O P Budholia's *Anita Desai, Vision and Technique In Her Novels* (B R Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2001) and *Critical Responses to Anita Desai* (Vol. 1) edited by Shubha Tiwari (Atlantic, New Delhi, 2004), are relevant to our discussion. In the latter, the chapter on *Journey to Ithaca* is by the same critic, Budholia, who wrote the earlier book.

chosen name (Sita, the model wife in Hindu mythology), as well as the irresolvable conflict of the character make this a powerful work. The psychic anguish that comes from the sense of entrapment as a woman is a predominant theme in the novel. I think I read in an interview somewhere that Desai said that if she had been younger, she would have made her character, Sita, kill herself (like Monisha did in *Voices in the City*). But with the maturing of her art and vision, Desai began to show in her writings how most triumphs or even survivals were really compromises with the contingencies of living.

In the novels that follow, we find a similar pattern. In what is widely considered one of her strongest novels, *In Custody*, again, the fundamental progress of the novel is towards disillusionment or, at least, the ending of the protagonist's misconceptions. The process of self-discovery and self-recovery, though, does not yield the promised ecstasies but results in much pain and some knowledge. The point, whatever the outcome, is that the journey is more important than the destination.

This is the message of Cavafy's poem too:

> Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
> To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
> But do not hurry the voyage at all.
> It is better to let it last for long years;
> and even to anchor at the isle when you're old,
> rich with all you have gained on the way,
> not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

It is better, that is, not to arrive at the destination too soon, lest it proves disappointing. Better to keep it fixed in the mind, but linger on the way, enjoying and relishing what one has accumulated thus far. Ithaca may not offer 'riches' but only a resting place in old age. All it gives is 'a beautiful voyage' till we actually reach its shores:

> Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage.
> Without her you would never have taken the road.
> But she has nothing to give you now.

The last line, with its unequivocal declaration, underscores the emptiness of all destinations. And yet, there is some value in what Ithaca stands for, after all:

> And if you have found her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
> With such great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience
> you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

The plural, 'Ithacas', in the last line underscores the symbolic nature of all destinations. Ithaca, thus, becomes a trope for all kinds of human longing which, whether they are fulfilled or not, are valuable because they launch endless journeys towards them, during which much is gained and garnered. But, these Ithacas, are more valuable for the quests they induce than for any ultimate fulfilment that they offer. The poem, thus, moves beyond a simple affirmation or an equally simple negation to a more complex and rich state of intermediate satisfaction.

In this novel, India, more specifically, spiritual India, becomes a kind of Ithaca. The main charaters are Sophie and Matteo, a European couple, who come to India as hippies in the early 1970s, in search for spiritual enlightenment. Rather, it is Matteo who is drawn to this India of yogis, sages and mystics, partly through a reading of the book which was at the heart of the hippie cult, Herman Hesse's *The Journey to the East* (1932). While Matteo is a dreamy, 'feminine' Italian with an unhappy childhood, his wife Sophie is a hard-headed German who is practical and quite materialistic in her approach. Most of the novel is from her point of view.

The story begins with Matteo lying sick in a hospital in India. Sophie has come to fetch him. Matteo's sickness is partly a result of the death of the Mother, the spiritual leader in whose ashram Matteo has finally found his destination after much wandering and sorrow. Sophie, who had left Matteo at the Mother's ashram earlier after the birth of their second child there, has done her investigations into the past of the Mother. She has uncovered what seems a tale of astonishing and startling surprises. In the novel, the Mother is actually Laila, born in Egypt, the daughter of Alma and Hamid. She went to study in Paris where she was entranced not only by Eastern occult and spirituality but by an Indian dancer named Krishna (apparently modelled on Uday Shankar). Joining his troupe, she tours Europe and North America before going to India with him. Once here, she suddenly disappears to the ashram of a guru and remains behind after his death as the Mother. Sophie actually meets an old and emaciated Krishna who gives her the Mother's diary. This is the climax of the novel. Armed with this knowledge, she returns to look for Matteo.

Relating this story to the pattern suggested earlier, the 'intended' reading of the novel or, at least, the most obvious, first order interpretation would be as follows. Like Ithaca, India has yielded little on arrival, least of all the promised and sought-after enlightenment or nirvana. Yet what it has offered is a rich voyage of self-discovery and, to Sophie, an even more exciting investigative adventure into the construction of *gurudom*. In other words, this is yet another narrative of disillusionment. The message is reminiscent of *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971); don't expect anything special from India; it

is just another, tired, poor, dirty and hungry third world country, though not devoid of unexpected, and memorable compensations. Of course, in the earlier novel, there was a similar message about England as well, a bidirectional disillusionment, with a cross-migration of two sets of characters.

The point that Desai makes in both novels has to do with the nature and consequences of human expectations. Is there anything worth striving for? Or are all quests revealed to be chimerical in the end? The novels suggest that though we may not get what we expect, if we are capable of opening ourselves to *what is*, to the reality, so to speak, then we will be given something else which is comparable in value. The problem is that we are seldom interested in the real so we constantly superimpose what we imagine upon it. It is this superimposition, this projection of our own fantasies and desires, which causes so much bitter suffering.

## III

Such a reading is at first rather convincing, so nicely profound, with a clear and uplifting moral. Moreover, in its thematic structure and plot composition, it seems to follow an order similar to the earlier novels. So when it is both plausible and consistent what could be wrong with it? I would submit that there are several things in the text and outside it which complicate this sort of reading. First of all, there is a fundamental, almost irreconcilable difference between Matteo and Sophie. Their two, contrasting points of view disallow one outcome or thematic import for their two journeys. This is seen from the very beginning of the book and highlighted even in simple things like the physical appearance – for instance, Matteo's long hair versus Sophie's short, 'manly' cut. The fundamental difference is, of course, in their approach to life. Matteo is seriously interested in spirituality, though he is somewhat weaker-willed than Sophie. Sophie, on the other hand, is totally unattracted to what she considers a mystic mumbo-jumbo. Hence, what we see in the novel is not one quest but of two different ones. Their trajectories and outcomes, too, cannot be identical.

There is also a further complication. While it is reasonably clear what Matteo wants, it is never fully clear what Sophie does. In the beginning this difficulty is less serious; while Matteo wants to visit gurus and ashrams, Sophie wants to go to Goa to party. She does the latter, but lands into further difficulties. Separated from Matteo, she descends into a sort of hippie hell, lying drunk and utterly destitute in her own vomit. Such degradation is totally out of character with the otherwise self-possessed, stable and German Sophie.

Well, presumably, Sophie wants neither the senseless hedonism of the hippies nor Matteo's spiritual delusions. At least this is what we might infer if we wish to take a charitable view of Desai's characterization of her. Yet, the question remains, what does she want? Desai does not seem to be clear. Instead, she is made subordinate to the interests of the plot. In fact, in the end, she is turned into something of an investigative journalist, uncovering the Mother's past with such single-minded determination. Why would she do that? She is not seen a great truth-seeker to begin with. Yet, let us once again, give her the benefit of the doubt. She is, after all, first introduced into the novel as a freelance journalist and her initial motivation for visiting India is to write about it. So, let us assume that she reverts, albeit involuntarily, to her initial role and vocation. Yet, throughout the novel, we know more about what she does not want than what she does. She constantly criticizes both Matteo and things Indian. On a pilgrimage with a group of believers, for instance, all that she notices is a dead child in the hands of a helpless mother. That, it would appear, is what happens to pilgrims and spiritual junkies, according to her.

Moreover, because Sophie is at the centre of the narrative, it is her viewpoint which predominates. Alternative readings are possible only when we reduce her authority and question her interpretations of people and events. An important interpretative issue therefore is just how reliable and believable Sophie is. What I have just suggested is that her motivation is neither clearly defined nor consistent. The result is that we are forced to problematize her role in the novel. It becomes evident that for a more productive reading of a novel, we shall have to look through and yet beyond her.

We realize to begin with that Matteo is reasonably satisfied being the Mother's close disciple. The fact that he falls sick after his guru's death does not necessarily mean that he shares Sophie's scepticism or disillusionment. Though the 'objective fact' of Matteo's sickness is meant to substantiate the triumph of Sophie's materialistic reading of India, is it indeed so? On the one hand, this puzzle is never fully solved. What is clear, on the other hand, is the author's anxiety to tip the scales in Sophie's favour, to valorize her interpretation that Matteo's spiritual project has failed. Yet, the possibility of the success of such a project is never entirely suppressed. Somewhere at the heart of the novel, this tension persists. Perhaps, it is Sophie who is wrong; perhaps, the Mother and Matteo are right. It is such a subterranean, unexorcized ghost that in fact saves the novel from being a reductive and flat story of simple disillusionment in which Indian spirituality is exposed for what it is, a hoax. The very vehemence of Sophie's objections, paradoxically, confirms Matteo's (and by extension, the reader's) faith that there is something more to the quest than Sophie's summary dismissal of it.

The unresolved strain on the narrative creates a sort of fault line. This is most evident in the portrayal of the Mother, perhaps the most crucial, and unfortunately unsuccessful, aspect of this book. Again, this portrayal is largely negative. Though the Mother is seen from Sophie's sceptical, even hostile, point of view, her character nevertheless assumes a certain autonomy. A mystery and sense of spiritual grandeur do surround her. Mastery over lower nature, unexpected love and compassion, a great organizational ability, an instant magnetism, all these qualities and more get conveyed to the reader through her character in spite of Sophie. The Mother, however, remains a reclusive, enigmatic figure, not fully comprehensible to either Matteo or Sophie. There is, of course, a rather simplistic psychological explanation which Desai offers to those who will take it: Matteo's childhood is unhappy; he has never known parental love; hence his spiritual quest and his surrender to the surrogate mother. Such an explanation, however, will not suffice; even the narrative offers it half-heartedly, almost as a concession to conventional psychoanalysis. The power and charisma of the Mother's ministry cannot be denied so easily. Even after Sophie's exposé of her ordinary past, the Mother still remains a challenging, if somewhat unrealized, character in the novel.

This brings us to a question which has been raised again and again: how closely does Desai's character resemble the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry? While I do not propose to conduct a detailed source study, it seems to me that Desai's character is an amalgam of two historical figures. The American dancer, Ruth St Denis and Mira Richard, who later became the Mother of Pondicherry. Perhaps, to obviate unnecessary speculation, Desai herself supplies a list of the books which helped her to write the novel. Certain incidents in the novel can indeed be traced to some of the books mentioned. For instance, the episode about the occultist who produces various fragrances is taken from Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946).

It is amply clear, however, that the real Mother of Pondicherry was a far vaster, greater and superior being than the one Desai could create. In that sense, the novel is somewhat disappointing. It fails to come to terms with the Mother as a spiritual phenomenon. There is nothing overtly disrespectful in the portrait, nothing scurrilous, vulgar or obscene; Desai, unlike Rushdie, is not likely to hurt the feelings of the faithful. Yet, hurt they will be because the book reduces the stature of the Mother and is unable to do justice to her. Acknowledging that she had based her character on the real person only worsens things. Though no 'official' response from Sri Aurobindo Ashram has been forthcoming so far, Ashram circles have voiced their disapproval and dismay over the book in private conversations.

I have heard devotees say, 'Anita Desai could have done better than produce such a superficial portrayal' or 'Why give the book more importance than it deserves by attacking it? The Mother needs no defence. Her life is there for all to see and experience'.

## IV

Originally, Viney Kirpal, the editor of the volume for which this was written, wanted me to write on this novel because she considered me 'an insider' to Indian spiritual traditions. I wish to disclaim such special knowledge, though I am flattered by such an assumption. However, I do admit that I am a student of modern Indian spiritual traditions and also of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. So I had a special interest in reading the novel. After my own disappointment, I found, when I surveyed the early responses to it is, that the novel had been criticized by several reviewers for being mediocre and unsatisfactory. Perhaps the best example of such a view was Pankaj Mishra's article in the *Indian Review of Books*. Kirpal, having read such reviews, had asked me my view. Was the novel indeed lacking in merit or was it attacked because of the reviewers' unfamiliarity with its material?

My answer to that question will have to be prefaced by some extra-textual information. When I heard that *Journey to Ithaca* was about the Mother, I was very keen to read it. I knew that Desai had met J Krishnamurti and also written about him. I wondered, in fact, if she finally 'turned' spiritual. After all, her novels did have a strong component of a perennial quest – a preoccupation with the ultimate meaning of life. So I was looking forward to this novel with interest and anticipation. Unfortunately, I felt quite let down. The novel failed to engage seriously with the subject. A part of me was annoyed over this seeming insensitivity. If Desai had such little insight and sympathy, why did she take on this kind of a project, I asked. I began to see that this is not a book which tries to make sense of Indian spirituality so much as to debunk it. This is basically a rationalist–sceptical, albeit liberal reading of spirituality. It is necessarily an outsider's perspective, not an insider's. Desai is so much an outsider here that one can scarcely consider her 'Indian'. Even the characters are European. Why? Is it because she feels closer to their point of view than that of any Indian's?

Predictably, Sophie, the author's mouthpiece, even wishes to know if the Master and the Mother had a sexual relationship (136–7). 'Did they marry?' she asks. Her informant, Montu-*da*, is embarrassed. 'We are not speaking of – of ordinary beings, please. We are talking of supramental beings and the union of the divine', he replies. But Sophie persists, 'Did they live as man and wife? [...] As man and wife – physically?' Montu-*da* flushes purple, takes out a large handkerchief to mop his face. 'As body and soul are one, yes.' he replies.

Obviously, the question is not answered satisfactorily and leaves a lurking doubt in the reader's mind. In contrast to this fictional prudishness, there is no squeamishness in the Ashram circles about the relationship between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It is widely recognized that it was *not* a sexual relationship. There is no evidence to indicate that the Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were sexual partners. Therefore, there is no embarrassment in answering such questions. The case of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, they were always surrounded by disciples and attendants, so there was never any question about secrecy or guilt about these issues. In the novel, instead, much is made of this aspect. The point is not that such questions are unanswerable or embarrassing. Why should they be? Why should Montu-*da* be so ashamed or disconcerted? As if the answers we gather to such questions tell the whole truth.

But more than this, the overall attitude of the novel to spiritual phenomena is disrespectful and critical. This attitude is reflected in Sophie throughout the novel. For instance, earlier in the book, Sophie taunts Matteo: 'What is she anyway? [...] Looks Indian, sounds Indian, but not Indian. Well, what is she then?' (131). It is as if there is something not quite honest or truthful about the Mother. Sophie implies that Matteo is being taken in by a fraud. Because the Mother is not fully comprehensible, Sophie implies that that she is somehow dishonest. Sophie wishes to *fix* the identity of the Mother, to consider her only from her own limited level of understanding. But, as Sophie herself realizes, such understanding is rather inadequate and reductive.

Later, the discovery by Sophie that the Mother is Egyptian, that she has been a dancer, and that the Master proclaimed his oneness with her does give us new information, but does not help her solve the riddle. The reason for this is that Sophie's understanding of herself is so limited. Presumably for her, whether two people have sex with one another or not is the paramount means of ascertaining their relationship with one another. Two people can be closer than ever in a celibate relationship, while a sexual relationship may in fact be casual and irresponsible. Having or not having sex cannot be central to the inner meaning of a relationship. The book, by making such an assumption, falls into the modern trap which makes sex the defining, if not sole, feature of a relationship. From the spiritual point of view, then, Sophie's idea of sexual union, that is the union of bodies, is immature. Such a union may not be the most, but a less intimate of unions. Of the seven sheaths of the body, the physical, or the *annamaya kosha*, is the outermost. If so, if two people are really united at the higher levels of consciousness, their union at the physical is of little consequence: if it fulfils some purpose, it will take place; if not they can easily do without it. At least in Sri Aurobindo's yoga, sexuality was something which was meant to be overcome and transcended. Even today, the *sadhaks*

and the *sadhikas* in the ashram are expected to practice *brahmacharaya*. Even if some of them fail, their failure does not necessary make the ideal of *brahmacharaya* false. This, or something to this effect, could have been a more appropriate answer to Sophie's query. Instead, the novel creates an aura of possibilities and ambiguities regarding this issue, planning suspicion in the minds of readers, insinuating that there is something improper or not quite straightforward about the relationship between the Master and the Mother. This is unfair because whatever the answer to Sophie's question, they will still end up looking bad. If they have had sex, that would contradict their professed theology; if they are celibate, it would go against modern notions of how 'normal' relationships are constituted. It is this lack of openness that makes the book weak and inequitable in its take on Indian spirituality.

But, when read in a totally different manner, against the grain, so to speak, we might actually see the book as exemplifying the inadequacy of the secular–materialist approach to spirituality. Setting out to show the falsehood of spiritual phenomena, the book actually ends up exposing its own fallibility and limited capacity of judgement. The result is that, almost in spite of itself, Sophie's and Desai's lack of insight become foregrounded. As such, the novel becomes, unintentionally, as much a critique of a 'secular' reading of spirituality as of spirituality itself. Thus, a first order, literalist reading of the novel actually diminishes its stature. *Journey to Ithaca* as a critique of Indian spirituality is a failure. But when we start seeing it as a more sophisticated text which not only deglamorizes Indian spirituality, but also debunks its rationalist–positivist interpreters, we begin to appreciate the novel better. No doubt, the latter self-critique is implied and covert, yet it is inescapable. The over-reactions and simple-mindedness of Sophie forces it upon us. We are compelled to look beyond Sophie, to reject her simplistic misunderstanding of Indian spirituality. We must admit that Sophie is not always right, indeed that her view is faulty and limited. Contrary to the meaning of her name, she is rather unwise. The novel thus thrives on irony and ambiguity. Such a reading,, in my opinion, is the best way of giving the novel its due.

## V

But there is a further irony about *Journey to Ithaca* and, this, unfortunately, is not an irony directed at the reader but at the author herself. Desai, no doubt, intended India to be a type of Ithaca. Cavafy's poem itself hints at this in the last line when he says, 'you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean'. The plural suggests that there are several 'Ithacas'.

What I would contend, as a counterargument, is that India itself has been a potent and powerful symbol not just in our own tradition but in the Western

mind too. And most certainly, India is *not* an Ithaca. This, in fact, is the crux of the problem with the novel. Desai's book might be successful as a journey to Ithaca, but never as 'a passage to India'. Unfortunately for her, however, she has chosen to superimpose Ithaca upon India. Whereas Ithaca was a small, rather insignificant island to which a great Greek hero, Odysseus, had to perforce return after his wanderings, India is a large subcontinent, full of promise and possibilities. This is a land in which all of one's fantasies and desires can be played out; this is the golden and fabled cradle of world religions, the country of the Vedic *rishis*, of Mahavir and Buddha, of Shankaracharya, of Kabir, Nanak, Tulsidas and Meera, of Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi. How can such a country become just another 'Ithaca'? To consider it such is a telling confession of inadequacy of the novelist. It is, to put it simply, an untenable metaphoric mismatch. India can become Ithaca only by an unnatural and implausible reduction of its stature. Even Western literary tradition does not support such a reduction. Both Whitman's 'Passage to India' and Forster's novel of the same title suggest that journeys to India, unlike to Ithaca, are also passages to *more* than India. This 'more' is, however, also a part of India itself, not really exterior to it.

In this sense, the notion of Ithaca applies not so much to Sophie's or Matteo's journeys, not so much to the spiritualist India of Desai's contrivance, but to the reader's own efforts in reading the novel. The novel does not deliver what it promises. Its reading is disillusioning and disappointing; the reader is chastised for expecting too much. Why look for something that simply isn't there? Why look for an India when all you get is an Ithaca? After all, Anita Desai is not Raja Rao!

Unfortunately, 'Ithaca' ends up being an objective correlative of Desai's fictional limitations. It is a good read as long as we do not expect to arrive. Arrival is so disappointing, not just in the Ithaca of the poem but far more so in Desai's novel. The style, the sensitivity, the poetic appeal of the language, ultimately, reveal an impoverished spirit, a heart not deep or wise enough, merely a well-intentioned modern mind, limited in range and understanding.

## VI

I have already made this epistle too long. I must bring my reflections to a close with one final contention. The metaphor of the journey to Ithaca may apply equally well to recent FEN as it does to Desai's text. Hailed and touted as the surpassing achievement of a brave new generation, this body of work has received more than its share of attention. It has produced heroes and international celebrities, big books that have done brisk business worth millions of dollars in the international publishing marketplace. Added to this is the

self-congratulation and narcissism of this generation, the best example of which is Salman Rushdie's by now notorious Introduction to the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing* (1997). He declares that what he means by Indian writing is merely Indian English writing. As if to rub it in, he underscores this as the main point of his book:

> This is it:
> *the prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages', during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, 'Indo-Anglian' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.*
>
> (Italics in the original).

Rushdie quotes some of V S Naipaul's statements in a similar vein too. But what is the truth value of Rushdie's opinions? I feel no need to engage him here as several other critics already have, but have cited his words merely to illustrate an attitude of superior superficiality characteristic of some FEN. Incidentally, in the same piece, Rushdie also says, 'I agree with Naipaul that mysticism is bad for novelists', advice that a novelist that he much admires, Anita Desai, did not choose to follow. Or perhaps followed it to the point of turning mysticism into mystification.

Yet, unfortunately, all this hype and hoopla cannot hide what might be the real problem with FEN. We might ask how many really great books or writers it has really produced? Interminable narcissism, stylistic hypertrophy, or garrulous gimmickry do not necessarily a great book make. Of the very few of these books that touch the soul, nourish the mind and senses, and exhilarate and refresh, I would say that *The Shadow Lines* is a notable example. But there are not too many more. Perhaps, at the heart of FEN is a mediocrity which is sought to be covered up in the hype over royalty figures.

To that extent, this whole journey into the meaning of modern FEN is merely a journey to Ithaca.

# 11

# *CUCKOLD* IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION[1]

## Insiders and Outsiders

It would not be an exaggeration to consider Kiran Nagarkar as one of the least recognized and most talented of Indian English novelists. As such his best book *Cuckold* (1997), is an obvious and fitting candidate for this book celebrating another canon of Indian English fiction. But before I discuss this text, it would be useful to locate Kiran Nagarkar in the tradition of Indian English writing because as a bilingual and marginalized writer, he himself quite aptly represents alternate canonicity. I wish to approach my task in a somewhat unorthodox way by beginning both on a personal and a parochial note. Originally, the context of such a beginning was Kiran Nagarkar's winning the Sahitya Akademi award in 2001 for the best book in English by an Indian author. Since I knew Kiran and was one of those who had nominated this book for the award, I was particularly thrilled that he got the award – though it came not a day too soon.

Even at the risk of sounding somewhat chauvinistic, I must point out that Nagarkar is not only the first Maharashtrian to get the award for English fiction, but also the first Chitpavan Brahmin to be so recognized. Such an observation, quite paradoxically, becomes relevant or significant precisely because any attempt to capitalize on or emphasize Kiran's Chitpavan-ness or Marathi-ness so as to place him in a larger body of writers or a tradition of writing, comes a cropper. The curious, if not so obvious fact is that there are no Chitpavans to speak of in Kiran's books, and not many Marathis either! *Cuckold* is set in sixteenth century Mewar, with non-Marathi protagonists and even *Ravan and*

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[1] First delivered as the keynote address to a conference on Kiran Nagarkar at the Department of English, University of Mumbai, on 7 March 2001, an earlier version was published as 'Kiran Nagarkar and the Tradition of the Indian English Novel' in *The Shifting World of Kiran Nagarkar's Fiction* (2004). I have tried to retain some of the flavour and the tone of the original.

*Eddie* shows greater familiarity with Goan-Christians and lower-caste Ghatis in a suburban Bombay *chawl* rather than with the Konkanastha Brahmins or Marathi-speaking elites of present times. This fact is not surprising when we understand that what seems to attract and inspire Nagarkar is not identity but *otherness*. He is most at ease in writing about people who seem least like his own supposed community and group.

All the same, Nagarkar is not so unusual in the difficulty he presents in fitting into a suitable slot in the body of Indian English writing. In an essay called 'Minority and Ethnicity in Indian English literature' I argued that Indian English writing is particularly amenable to what we might call minority voices – whether these are religious minorities, women or homosexuals. It is the Christians, Parsis, Sikhs, Muslims, and even Jews (a microscopic minority of the Indian population), who have distinguished themselves in Indian English writing in much greater proportion to their actual numbers, than their Hindu counterparts. And even among those writers from the so-called Hindu communities or dominant language families, it is usually those who are outsiders to those communities, especially diasporic writers, that have become major Indian English writers. I could offer several examples. From the earliest generation of major novelists, let us consider Mulk Raj Anand. He cannot be thought of as a 'typical' member of a lower-caste agrarian Punjabi community (his father was from the coppersmith caste and served as a subaltern in the British Indian army). Anand moved out of his kinship group, not only to study in England, but also to take a very incisive look at his past and background. He became critical of caste structures and highlighted the burning and bleeding social problems of his times. In fact, his novels interrogate Hindu traditions and customs such as untouchability and the oppression of women. Take another example, Anita Desai. The daughter of a Hindu Bengali father and a German mother, educated in Delhi, she married a Gujarati executive, lived in Bombay and Delhi for several years, before leaving India to settle down in the US. Even Brahmin-born writers like Raja Rao or Kamala Markandeya went outside the fold before they became major writers. In another paper, I called some of these dominant major Indian English novelists, 'debrahminised brahmins', in that sense thrice born (see 'Caste of the Indian English Novel' in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*).

Thus, not only is Indian English especially hospitable to 'outsiders' but the 'insiders' also function, quite often, as though they were outsiders. Indian English Hindus, for instance, often display signs of minoritarianism by being aliens, for one reason or the other, to their own communities. To understand this complex dynamic of the outsider/insider in Indian culture, one might invoke some famous, early twentieth century Bengali novels by two of India's greatest writers. Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* (1908) or Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's

*Parineeta* (1914), more specifically in their treatment of the Brahmo–Hindu conflict, show the multiple layers and meanings of an identity crisis.. Becoming a Brahmo in those days, these novels show, was a very significant break away from mainstream, especially upper caste Hinduism, in the nineteenth century. It meant being ostracized and excommunicated from one's caste, which had drastic implications, including the denial of commensality and endogamy. In effect, one lost one's identity, also, in some cases, losing one's livelihood. No one would marry one's children, no one would attend weddings and feasts or funerals in one's family; in effect, one suffered a kind of 'death'; one became a non-person. At least till one found another identity, another community to belong to, or another identity to adopt.

I have deliberately brought up the theme of the Brahmo–Brahmin conflict because it has a special resonance to Nagarkar's own story. His grandfather started as an orthodox Chitpavan Brahmin, but later became a Brahmo, for which he was ostracized from the community; he was also married for a second time to someone totally outside the community – to a Jew. From his mother's side, Kiran has Bengali and Uttar Pradesh Brahmin blood, so though he was raised in the respectable, middle-class, upper caste neighbourhood of Hindu Colony in Dadar, Mumbai, neither his background nor upbringing were typical. The Brahmos were, of course, monotheistic, reform sect, totally against idol worship. The rest of the Hindus considered them very Westernized. Nagarkar's father was not only English-literate, but anglicized. In his own somewhat chequered career, Kiran tried his hand at teaching but was fired for failing too many students. He later became a copywriter and creative director of an advertising agency. He began his literary career with an acclaimed avant-garde Marathi novel, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (Seven Sixes are Forty-Three), but it earned him only Rs 120 in royalties and was, besides, panned by the hidebound Marathi literary establishment.

I mention these biographical details to suggest that Nagarkar, both by his family background and in his own individual life is very clearly an outsider, not just to the more narrowly defined community of Chitpavans or the larger Marathi-speaking people, but to Hindu society itself. Temple worship and the piety of conventional religion were alien to the Brahmos, but they substituted this by what some consider a somewhat dull and insipid form of worship, which relied on sermons and dignified but not terribly lively music. Nagarkar is averse to both of these – the dark and cavernous Hindu temple with its suffocating smells (in one of his interviews he alludes to his aversion to smelly dhotis), and this 'bowdlerized' form of Brahmo worship. The fact that Nagarkar is an outsider to both these is related not only to the creation of his own idiom and worldview as a writer but also to the special kind of literary modernism that I shall discuss later. Insofar as the latter is concerned, the additional fact that he fits properly

neither into Marathi nor Indian English writing is also significant. I would call Nagarkar's modernism rebellious without being revolutionary, irreverent without being impious. Nagarkar's work, thus, is typical of many other Indian English texts in that it is the product of a cultural outsider. Yet, it is, at the same time, different in that it reflects not just a bilingual sensibility, but one that is deeply aware of, though not necessarily accepting of Indian traditions. To change my own nomenclature a bit, I would call it the sort of heterodoxy of the critical insider more than the unorthodoxy of a rank outsider.

It is therefore understandable that, I wish to offer a refutation and counterargument to any parochial applauding and appropriation of him as the first Chitpavan novelist to win the Sahitya Akademi award for English fiction. Instead, I would say Kiran Nagarkar is a part of this larger tradition of Indian English Literature in which not so much insiders and majorities, but outsiders and minorities have found prominent voices.

No wonder that the first Indian English writers were 'minorities'. In fact now it is proven that the first Indian English writer was not Henry Derozio, who incidentally, was also an Anglo-Portuguese–Indian, but a man called Dean Mahomed (1759–1851). As shown by Michael Fisher in *The First Indian Author in English* (1996), Mahomed, whose father served the British army in India, started his career being kidnapped during a hostile raid on his village, found patronage under an Irish army cadet, toured India with him, went to England, married an Englishwoman, and eventually became a 'shampooing surgeon' in Brighton. His memoirs, for which he raised money with subscriptions, are in the form of thirty-eight letters addressed to an unidentified recipient. They detail Indian life in the late eighteenth century and also contain observations on Mahomed's stay in England and Ireland. Early Indian English writers like Mahomed, Derozio, and later Toru Dutt, were thus all outsiders to mainstream 'Hindu' traditions.

From our own period, I could cite Nissim Ezekiel, who was Jewish, or Dom Moraes, who was Goan-Catholic, or Keki N Daruwalla, a Parsi born in Lahore, as examples of major poets, who were also outsiders to Hindu India. A more interesting case is that of Jayanta Mahapatra, who is often read, unlike most other modernists, as a writer whose work is deeply rooted in his community that is in Cuttack, and in the Oriya ethos, is actually revealed to be an uncompromising critic of that community and culture. The rootedness is deceptive because the society he writes about is portrayed as traditional, static, almost atavistic and pervasively cruel. In a way, that is his attitude to 'traditional Hindu India'; it is certainly neither a nostalgic celebration nor a sentimental appreciation. Again, we must not forget that Mahapatra is Christian and his grandfather was a convert, a 'rice Christian', as Mahapatra himself puts it, someone persuaded to convert during a famine with the inducement of food.

A careful reading of Mahapatra thus shows a sustained critique of the status quo, of the convention-bound, hierarchical and unjust Oriya Hindu society. If we were to consider fiction writers, then from Khushwant Singh to Salman Rushdie, we have a string of powerful outsiders; more recently, Rohinton Mistry and Arundhati Roy can also be said to belong to this category. I think Kiran Nagarkar shares their tradition. It is therefore not surprising to notice his proclivity to write not about 'average' Maharashtrians but about 'others,' seen once again in his latest novel, *God's Little Soldier* (2006).

## (Re)locating Kiran Nagarkar

The first step in trying to locate Nagarkar in the tradition of Indian English writing would be to consider him, as I have already shown, as an outsider in his own community. But we must not forget, as hinted earlier, that though he is an outsider, he is not hostile or alienated; rather, to reverse the metaphor, he is a 'critical insider' to the larger tradition of modern, secular India, somewhat like U R Anantha Murthy. Here one can see a clear contrast with Salman Rushdie, who would be an outsider to this tradition however much he may try to claim otherwise. Rushdie is too cosmopolitan and unmistakably expatriate as opposed to Nagarkar who is a resident-national and modernist.

The second way of trying to locate Nagarkar's work would be to see him as a member of a literary avant-garde, in fact, as one of the progenitors and inaugurators of literary modernism in Marathi and bilingual writing in India. With his very first novel, he already came to be recognized as a modernist pioneer in Marathi before he turned to writing in English. It is this avant-garde tendency that he also brings into his English writing, particularly in a new style, sensibility, narrative technique and subject matter. It also needs to be stressed that this aspect of his work cannot be viewed in isolation but must be seen in conjunction with the work of other important Marathi bilingual writers like Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and Vilas Sarang. What we have here is a quartet of modernists who write in both Marathi and English, and who are very different from other Indian English modernist writers like Nissim Ezekiel or Keki Daruwalla on the one hand, and neo-traditionalist Marathi writers like Shri Mahanur on the other.

There is a third way in which we might speak of Nagarkar's writing, and I propose to do so by problematizing the very idea of a tradition of Indian English literature. This is a rather contentious and as yet an unresolved issue. It has been asked if Indian English literature has a tradition at all, and if it does, should it be divorced from and considered separately from the larger tradition of Indian literature written in its many languages? One of the best discussions of this question is in Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (1994). The earliest scholars to write about Indian English literature, such as K R

Srinivasa Iyengar and M K Naik have argued that there is, indeed, a tradition of Indian English literature. However, focusing first on poetry where this debate is far more lively, we find that a number of modernist writers actually say there is no tradition. They contend that their poetry has nothing in common with that of earlier writers like Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. These modern poets and anthologists believe that the tradition of Indian English poetry begins, paradoxically, after independence, in the 1950s, with Nissim Ezekiel. This view has been repeated again and again by most of the major modernist poet anthologists such as R Parthasarathy, Keki Daruwalla, Vilas Sarang and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.[2] They declare in the introductions to their anthologies that the earlier poets are practically worthless. In effect, what they imply is that there is actually hardly any tradition of Indian English literature – there is no tradition but there is only a contemporaneity. This serves to centre stage them as the only poets worth studying. The argument against literary continuities and in favour of major discontinuities between the writers of the nineteenth century and the writers of the twentieth century ends up canonizing the contemporary writers.

We might ask the same question of fiction: is there a tradition of Indian English fiction? Again, we find a rather common view that Indian English fiction begins in the 1930s with the Big Three – Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao. In recent years, more and more works are being unearthed to push that date back. Yet, most critics and readers believe that Indian English fiction only came of age in the 1930s. But the question of the relationship between the earlier writers and the more recent ones remains undecided as does the worth of these earlier writers. Whether we go back to *Rajmohan's Wife* (1866), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's abortive attempt to write in English, or *Bianca,* which is another incomplete work by Toru Dutt, we find that the Indian English novel has very tenuous and tentative beginnings. Published in 1864, the former is a sort of half completed novel or hurriedly abandoned novel, after which Bankim stopped writing in English altogether, while the latter, an unfinished romance, is weak, if tantalizing. Early Indian English novels, then, typically embody the form of the unfinished. Less frequently practiced than poetry, the novel produces few memorable works during the first fifty years of its existence. Even well into the 1920s, examples of what might be called stable or satisfying are few and far between. Even works such as *Govinda Samanta* (1874) by Lal Behari Day or an earlier work, 'A journal of forty-eight

[2] I have written about this in numerous places. See my Introduction to *Indian Poetry in English* and 'Modernism and Its Discontents' for example.

hours of the year 1945', which was published in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* of 6 June 1835 and long considered the first Indian English short story, can hardly be considered well-developed examples of the genre. But what is important about these early texts is that they show a desire for experimentation with the various types of narrative, only a few of which survive and crystallize in the twentieth century. In this regard, we should recall some novelists of the early decades of the twentieth century who attempted to write historical fiction, which was already a popular and well-established genre in the *bhashas*. I can think of at least three such authors: Sirdar Jogendra Singh, A Madhaviah, and Aiylam Subrahmanier Panchapakesa Aiyar. Singh went on to write novels like *Kamla* (1925) and *Nasrin: An Indian Medley* (1911), but his first book was a historical novel, *Nurjahan: the Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909). Madhaviah not only wrote *Thillai Govindan* (1908), his best known work, but also *Clarinda* (1915), which was a historical novel. Aiyar's many works include *Baladitya: A Historical Romance of Ancient India* (1930) and *Chanakya and Chandragupta* (1951). Historical novel, though successful in languages like Bengali and Marathi, failed in English. I mention this genre especially because Nagarkar's *Cuckold* may be considered a very special example of it.

But the one kind of novel which did hold the most promise in the early years of Indian English fiction was the narrative of social realism, first practiced by Day in his prizewinning *Govinda Samanta*. This form suddenly attained maturity in the two novels of K S Venkatramani, *Murugan, the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan, the Patriot* (1934). Here we see for the first time a socially responsible realism linked not so much to the colonial or conversion narrative as in the earlier work, but to the freedom struggle and to Indian nationalism. After the first glimmers of Indian English fiction in the early nineteenth century, it took nearly a hundred years for such a novel to be written. It is this type of a novel that attains the greatest prestige in later years with practitioners like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and others, right down to Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. In *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel,* I have tried to show how in the nineteenth century first emerged most of the types of writing which were then developed or practiced later. That is why, going back to the nineteenth century is important. The later novels were predicted by, and predicated on, these earlier efforts. Even in *Rajmohan's Wife,* we see important elements of characterization, style and theme which are developed in later writings. That is why I consider it is possible to talk of a 'tradition' of Indian English fiction.

There is another kind of a critique of this notion of a tradition of Indian English writing that I wish not to counter, but support before returning to Nagarkar. This argument is more persuasive than the merely narcissistic obsession with one's own generation of writers. According to it, we cannot

constitute a tradition of Indian English writing at all because such a monolingual tradition does not, indeed cannot exist; instead, we need to constitute a tradition of Indian writing or Indian fiction, which takes into account the literary productions in the major Indian languages and how they impacted one another. If English monolingualism is a colonial imposition, to carry it forward to this date would be to reify a colonial legacy. The cultural complexity that is India will not respond to such an imposition, nor be contained in any monolingual/cultural literary tradition. The argument here is that because Indian English creativity is a kind of bilingual creativity in the first place, we cannot consider Indian English literature in isolation. There is no Indian English tradition as such but traditions which talk to works written in other Indian languages.

Consequently, if we wish to read Kiran Nagarkar, then we must also read Bhalchandra Nemade in Marathi, or Nirmal Verma in Hindi, or O V Vijayan in Malayalam. Only then will we see something emerging of what might be called the tradition of modern Indian fiction. Only when we can read across linguistic borders can we notice for example, the numerous narratives of the nation in the early twentieth century in all major Indian languages; works by Tagore and Sarat Chandra in Bengali, Govardhanram Tripathi in Gujarati, Kuvempu in Kannada, Viswanatha Satyanarayana in Telugu, Fakir Mohan Senapati in Oriya, and indeed similar works in every major Indian language seem fired by the same desire to support the struggle for freedom from foreign rule. These authors wrote large books, with a very big social sweep. Later on, after independence, in the 1960s, we have more fragmentary works, where this kind of nationalist paradigm, indeed where the nation itself, is being deconstructed, as happens in *Midnight's Children,* much later. From such a point of view, to talk of a tradition of Indian English writing is therefore considered unsatisfactory. What is required is to talk of a tradition of Indian writing.

I consider this argument favourable to my own broader project.[3] It does not contradict my position that it is useful to speak of a tradition of Indian English writing, but only extends it to suggest that the tradition should not be exclusively that of Indian English writing, but include the other relevant *bhashas* too. In the case of Nagarkar, such an argument would be very apt because he is, as I said earlier, a bilingual writer. A productive way of reading Nagarkar's works would thus be to place them in the larger context of Indian, not just Indian English fiction. I would like to suggest a few beginnings here.

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[3] See, for instance, my essay 'Indian Anglophony, Diasporan Polycentricism and Postcolonial Futures'.

## The Art of Kiran Nagarkar

First of all, let us consider *Ravan and Eddie*. Though the book was actually published as late as 1995, it was begun many years earlier as a screenplay. It seems to me that *Ravan and Eddie* is an example not so much of the sort of large and mainstream national largely pre-independence narrative (as exemplified, say, by *Kanthapura*), but a local, post-independence one (like, say, *Maila Aanchal*) which, though fragmentary, does serve to redefine our concept of the nation. I could of course also use the word 'postmodern' to describe *Ravan and Eddie*. That is because *Ravan and Eddie* clearly shows certain features and formal characteristics of what might be called literary postmodernism. It is disconnected in style, with discursive intrusions in the narrative. It has, moreover, several technical devices and effects, for example, 'doubling', and the supernatural gifts of Ravan, that one associates with magic realist or fantastic postmodern works. One might be tempted to compare it with *Midnight's Children* but, as far as I know, the book was started in Marathi much before *Midnight's Children* was published, which makes it a forerunner, not an also-ran. This makes one think about and question the accepted notion of how literary movements begin. There is an idea that they start in one particular place and at one particular time. For example English literary modernism is assumed to have started with Eliot and Pound in England. But this is a very limited and limiting view. I believe, instead, that literary movements start simultaneously in a number of different places, sometimes unbeknownst to one another but deeply related. Not so much 'separated at birth', which is the Bollywood formula, but twins born separately, which is as much a physical impossibility as it is a metaphysical reality. So, for example, literary postmodernism itself can be seen as appropriately decentered, with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Günter Grass and Vijayan, all writing at about the same time and doing similar things in totally different places and in mutually unintelligible languages. This happens not because they are reading each other's works but because something similar is emerging all over the world around the same time. That is why we need to see literary movements as decentred and multiple in their elaboration, with cross currents and multilateral exchanges of influence, even if these are not deliberate. We need not believe, for instance, that things start in the West and then find their echoes in India. Rather, we might begin to see them as having multiple centres of origin and dissemination, thus preferring the notion of polygenesis to orthogenesis when it comes to the emergence of ideas and movements. Thus what Rushdie was doing in *Midnight's Children*, Nagarkar, independently of him, was already experimenting with in his earlier drafts of *Ravan and Eddie.*

As in *Midnight's Children,* in this novel too, we see two boys, in this case one Goan-Catholic, one Hindu, who appear as doubles, if not twins, similar

to the kind of doubling that we have in *Midnight's Children* with Saleem and Shiva. We also have the supernatural gifts, the change of names, interreligious dialectics, criticism of communalism, and the use of cinema. This last is very important. Here, once again we see how Nagarkar differs from monolingual writers. For example, just as Arundhati Roy uses *The Sound of Music* as an important intertext in *The God of Small Things,* Nagarkar uses *Rock Around the Clock* in *Ravan and Eddie.* But unlike Roy, Nagarkar has not just used *Rock Around the Clock* but also *Dil De Ke Dekho*, thus bringing in a different kind of cultural mix which you do not find in the work of writers who are exclusively Indian English in their consciousness. This is what makes him an insider to the Indian cultural polyphony, albeit one who remixes it in his own fashion.

Let me finally turn to *Cuckold*, undoubtedly Nagarkar's most impressive achievement, and the title text in this chapter. To revert to the earlier question of the tradition of Indian English writing we will not be surprised to find that *Cuckold* does not fit anywhere. We might say *Ravan and Eddie* does belong to what we can call the postmodernist genre of novels as exemplified by the likes of *Midnight's Children*. But what do we do with *Cuckold*? As we saw earlier, Indian English writing lacks a well developed tradition or body of historical fiction. There are no major historical Indian novels in English, discounting the few examples I mentioned from the earlier period and more recent, but equally forgettable, works such as Bhagwan Gidwani's *The Sword of Tipu* (1989) or *Beneath the Marble Sky: A Novel of the Taj Mahal* (2004) by John Shors, which is not even by an Indian. Because there are many historical novels in other Indian languages such as Bengali and Marathi, one might argue that Nagarkar needs to be placed in that wider tradition. Yet, I would assert that *Cuckold* remains unique. This is because what Nagarkar does with history is totally different from what other, more conventional historical novelists do. Nagarkar, for starters, is not interested in recapitulating history or narrating a well-known historical legend. Neither does he wish to reinvoke such a story to raise the consciousness of the present generation or to rouse them to some cause such as patriotism or nationalism.

In fact, this is the defect that Nemade finds in most of the Marathi historical novels. He dubs them as part of the *Mochangad* trend because they represent 'the tendency to create an illusion of a non-existent reality'. According to him, these novels go contrary to social reality and are therefore escapist or romantic. He adds:

> the *Mochangad* trend was a combined product of Romanticism, Nativist revivalism and the Marathi tradition of the stylized retelling of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The characteristics of this trend are a

> fixation for a glorious past, suspense, fantasy and horror. This trend then is deliberately and self consciously anti-realistic (31–2).

I have mentioned Nemade here because of this important essay on the spectrum of the Marathi novel in which he talks about three basic idealized types. Of course the actual novels do not precisely confirm or conform to these types entirely. These abstractions are only a way of trying to organize large bodies of work. The three types, according to Nemade, are *kriti*, *pratikriti* and *riti*. I have modified and redeployed them in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novels*. These three types, in fact, correspond to what Scholes and Kellogg, Lodge and others have talked about in trying to analyze British and American novels. The *kriti* is a realistic novel; *kriti* suggests action, it suggests work, it also suggests a composition. It is, hence, a novel which goes towards society, engages with society, is part of society. *Pratikriti* is the counter to that because it goes into fantasy and fabulism, moving away from reality. It is true, of course that magic realism is not something that does not engage with society. One should not therefore take Nemade's rigid categories at face value, because such novels though anti-realistic on the surface actually demonstrate a very strong engagement with contemporary reality. Nemade's third type is the formalistic, *riti* where aesthetics and experimentation of form and language, are important, rather than content and theme.

For Nemade it is the *kriti* which is the most important; that is, a socially engaged novel which can actually intervene and change society. To that extent, Nemade is following a very powerful Marxian strand of criticism represented by critics such as Georg Lukács, for whom the novel is the literary form par excellence, because it can actually promote working class consciousness or at least foreground issues of class , even if it does so by ignoring or suppressing the interests of the working class. A novel thus, is a form which is designed – unlike the allegory which is a feudal form, unlike the epic which is a classical form – as a work of art reflecting the dominance of the bourgeois mode of consciousness. To that extent, it is best suited both to depict and challenge the *status quo* and therefore to engage with the 'real' history of a society.

In my own book, mentioned above, I argued that the Indian English novel hardly ever does this. Because of a disjuncture between the language and the social experience, its texts are written about people and events in a language which is not the language of those people. The natural tendency of an Indian English writer, hence, is to move away from society instead of moving towards it. There is an exception to this alienating clash between the medium and the culture if and when one writes only about the people who speak in English in India. But that would confine the writing to a very small section of people. If, however, one is writing about Meera, or about the Maharaj Kumar as in *Cuckold*,

or if one is writing about a variety of characters from different social strata, all of whom do not normally speak in English, then there is this problem, this emotional distance which has been noticed right from the beginning of Indian English criticism between what we may purport as the 'original' dialogue in an Indian language and its 'transcription' into English by the creative writer becomes all too evident. It is a part of the discourse of Indian English criticism from Paul Verghese and Meenakshi Mukherjee to Tabish Khair's recent book, *Babu Fictions* (2001). The point then is that except for a brief period during the freedom movement when a number of Indian English novelists actually wrote about socially relevant issues, the Indian English novel has by and large been a novel of retreat from social engagement, either into personal, psychological reality as in Anita Desai or Arun Joshi, or it is formalistic, with verbal experimentation, virtuosity and display of skill in the manner of presentation as in Rushdie or Roy. So the Indian English novel, I have argued, is not usually a *kriti*, an artistic act of engagement, but rather *riti*, an aesthetic act which is distant from its social milieu.

Should we conclude that *Cuckold*, like the other historical novels that Nemade classifies as *pratikriti*, tends towards the anti-realistic? But, if so, why hasn't Indian English literature despite all its other efforts at fantasy produced more historical novels? Of course, that is a different question which we cannot take up here. Let us, instead, focus on *Cuckold* to ask if it too is a part of this anti-realistic trend so that we can place, locate, understand this novel. I would say that what makes *Cuckold* so unique as a cultural product is that it is working at once in two contradictory ways and at two levels. It is and is not a historical novel, it is and is not 'realistic'.

At one level we do have the historical events and action – the wars, the invasion of Babar, the Battle of Khanua, battles against the Muslim sultan's forces from Gujarat, as well as the various intrigues, politics, statecraft. But there is also the psychological level, the interior landscape. And the most important manifestation of this is the ongoing introspection and reflection of the protagonist, Maharaj Kumar. There is also a third spiritual level, represented by the battle between the Maharaj Kumar and Meera, on the one hand, and the Maharaj Kumar and his rival Krishna, on the other. The novel thus works simultaneously in the public and private domains, in the physical and trans-physical realms. It is historical, yes, but its historicity works in a totally different way because it is also a completely contemporary novel. We can draw up lists of words, phrases and practices that are anachronistically familiar because they are from our own time, but which Nagarkar injects into the narrative of history. For instance, in a totally 'normal' way, the Maharaj Kumar writes in his journal that he went home 'after office hours'. We can prove, in fact, how the whole vocabulary of modernity has been injected into a historical setting. This is

what makes the novel a unique experiment; not its recreation of the past, but its interpellation of the present into the past. Yet it is not enough to say that. What makes *Cuckold* very special is that it has a medieval setting with a modern protagonist, a protagonist with a contemporary consciousness; a feudal social order and its cultural productions with a bourgeois protagonist. When I say bourgeois I mean a character with a specific kind of historical consciousness that is linked to a particular mode of production. Maharaj Kumar, in other words, is modern because he represents the values, not of the feudal order to which he belongs but those of the modern bourgeois.

Maharaj Kumar wants to modernize statecraft and governance. He wants to set up systems like a modern bureaucracy which will function independently of the people who run them. He wants to professionalize the state machinery. What is more, he wants to strengthen civil society. He promotes town planning and sanitation. Maharaj Kumar is the first one to recognize that the engine of history is driven by technology and not by ideology. This is a very modern idea. That is why he sets up an institute of defence studies, like our own contemporary National Defence Academy. He is also interested in new forms of weaponry. More specifically, he wants to move away from the Rajput code of honour and conduct warfare in a more pragmatic fashion. His, in other words, is a real protestant intervention, like that of the Knight in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), where we have a questioning, skeptical protagonist in an age of faith. In *Cuckold* we see all the trappings of the feudal order which is about to collapse and a modern protagonist who, among other things, wants to create a secular polity. Consider the way he tries to balance the religious claims of the different groups or his economic theories, among other things. Consider, also, all the modern, even Freudian psychological elements in the narrative, the use of dreams or of the Oedipal complex, to name two. These modern elements, penetrate into that historical milieu, making the novel a fascinating work. Such a combination of a feudal context and a bourgeois consciousness is a peculiar art – or, should we say, peculiar craft – that Nagarkar pulls off. Modernity is imposed on medievalism, somewhat reminiscent of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964), creating a situation in which the two contending forms of consciousness can only be contained, not reconciled, in the form of the novel. It is this that provides *Cuckold* with its peculiar tension.

But if we look at these two plot lines, the historical and the secular on the one hand, and then the personal and the mystical on the other, then we have another kind of tension being continuously maintained. The novel then constantly functions at two levels, with the chapters alternating between the first person narrative and the third person narrative. It would be interesting to ask how the third person narrative effects manipulations of plot and information that the first person narrative cannot. Introspective as Maharaj Kumar is, which

is also a modern trait – he is clearly the most introspective character in the novel always asking who he is, trying to define himself and his existential quest – he cannot deal with or reveal or confront certain things about himself. And it is in the third person narrative that these features of his personality emerge. The Freudian element of Maharaj Kumar's Oedipal relationship with Kausalya, who is his *dai* or wet nurse as well as his lover, the person who initiates him into sex, is an instance. Interestingly, there is also an Electra complex seen in the feeling that Leelavati, the Prime Minister's daughter, has for him. The novel thus has an epic sweep dealing with external events of great import and an introspective voice providing a constant commentary on them, so that there is tension and interplay between two fictional modes. All this makes *Cuckold* a very special type of historical novel.

Before I end this section on *Cuckold*, I want to ask one question and it has to do with Meera or 'Greeneyes', as Maharaj Kumar sometimes calls her. I think it is interesting that Nagarkar did not put Meera at the centre of this narrative. The character who appealed to him more was Maharaj Kumar because he was a historical blank and Nagarkar could recreate him in any way he liked. In a way he has been turned into a classic modern outsider, almost a Camus figure; a person who is doubted by his father, intrigued against by his stepmother, opposed and betrayed by a younger brother who wants to usurp the throne, cuckolded by his wife for a heavenly lover, and, alas, defeated in war and forgotten by history.

Both his public and private life end in failure. As to the former, he cannot stave off the onslaught of the Moghuls, nor save Chittor from defeat and desecration. On the private front he cannot have sex with his wife who constantly resists him, even though he is obsessively in love with her. So there is this constant anxiety in his life, an intolerable pressure, in his psychic being and in the novel. He is a wounded person with a riven heart, and the healing never quite happens, except perhaps in a masterly reversal at the conclusion of the novel.

What Nagarkar pulls off at the end is therefore utterly stunning. According to well-known legend, Meera disappears into the statue of Krishna. Here you have Maharaj Kumar disappearing into the statue of Krishna! It is he who has become the ultimate *bhakta*, the devotee – he who had always been so *vibhakta*, so divided, both internally and externally. It is he who finds that absolution of ultimate identification with that God who is both his rival and his refuge. Instead of taking the original version of Meera as the *bhakta*, as the devotee par excellence, Nagarkar makes the Maharaj Kumar the unwilling and unwitting exemplar. What an astonishing and brilliant way of rejecting the effete, cliché-ridden, traditional and so tame stereotype of the saintly singer in white, eyes downcast, strumming on her *ektara*, and substituting it with a modern character,

an outsider, a 'sinner' with all his psychological traumas, as an emblematic representation of the struggle of the soul, the spirit and the body. Meera, the saint, seems to have been a very boring, flat, one-dimensional character to Nagarkar, with his modernist urges, complexes and experiences. Reacting against the manner in which saints are constructed and the way their hagiographers make them out to be perfect, he renders Meera all too human, not an object of worship but of analysis. He writes not so that people be satisfied by worshipping her, but that they struggle to understand her humanity and vulnerability. That is why he puts a modern figure like Maharaj Kumar at the spiritual centre of the text. It is he who becomes the devotee, struggling with Krishna, even trying to impersonate the God to gain the affections of his earthly wife. Maharaj Kumar, like Krishna, starts playing the flute, and colours his body in indigo. In the end it is he who *becomes* Krishna by embracing the idol.

Centering the novel on the Maharaj Kumar makes the novel fictionally much more interesting. With Meera as the protagonist it would have been very difficult for the writer to get inside her consciousness. This, however, gives rise to another problem. Meera continues to be seen from the outside as a somewhat inexplicable character whose motivations seem contradictory. On the one hand, she greets the Maharaj Kumar after his victory over the Gujarat armies and saves the day when there is an orchestrated movement to call him a traitor, with black flags being waved. On the other hand, whenever the relationship becomes comfortable something happens to drive them apart. There is a constant tussle between her and the Maharaj Kumar. She forces Maharaj Kumar towards Krishna. He is not willing or happy in his submission, but is almost dragged by his feet because he is blocked spiritually, to begin with. Yet, this spiritual advancement is forced because of another kind of block: his natural avenues of fulfillment in coming close to the woman he loves are barred. That is why there is a kind of mandatory sublimation or transformation that he goes through. That this is extremely painful is well-documented in the novel. But in the process, Meera, in my opinion, remains unrealized, a character who is rather unconvincing because she is always seen from the outside, in relation to the Maharaj Kumar. Because she is portrayed as somebody whom Maharaj Kumar cannot understand fully – whether she is dancing or singing or absorbed in devotion – she is rendered so to us too, weird, crazy, inscrutable. Meera remains a somewhat novel object in the novel, never attaining the maturity of a true subject. While other characters seen from the outside by the protagonist–narrator attain a sense of subjectivity and selfhood, Meera alone is unfathomable and implausible.

There is an additional problem with all the scribblings of Meera in the novel. Yes, Nagarkar makes her a writer, instead of a singer,shifting her from the oral-performative to the writerly-scriptal, which in itself may be seen as a

modernist gesture. And his renderings of what we know of Meera's compositions are very unconvincing. It is an aggravated example of the Ramanujan problem of rendering in a modern idiom a sensibility which is essentially not just non-modern, but unavailable and unrecoverable to modernity. This is because they occupy and belong to two different structures of consciousness, the magical–mystical–mythic versus the mental–rational–instrumental. If you hear Meera's bhajans, even as they are being sung today, and compare them with Nagarkar's versions, we see a great gap, a gulf that seems unbridged. This is the one area where I believe the novel has a major problem. While we might consider Nagarkar's turning Meera into a writer as a sort of artistic license, the fact that he does not allow her to be the author of the *bhajans* we know so well today makes her a different character than the one we know. By not translating Meera's *bhajans* or even trying to provide another version of them, Nagarkar disappoints us. The fact that 'Greeneyes' or the 'little saint' is very different from the Meera of tradition cannot be wished away. In Maharaj Kumar, Nagarkar comes up with a credible historical character; in him, history is illuminated by fiction. In Meera, on the other hand, we see a veiling of history in a figure who bears little resemblance to the popular idea of Meera. Nagarkar's Meera neither resembles the hagiographical image of her, nor the modern person that newer methods of reconstructing the lives of female saints and mystics have yielded.

## Nagarkar's Modernity

Let me, before I conclude, return to the question that I had raised at the start of my discussion of *Ravan and Eddie* and *Cuckold*. How do we locate or situate these two texts in the spectrum of the Indian English novel? I had proposed a third way by which we might do so by examining Nagarkar's work in relation to the tradition of Indian fiction. Are these two texts in the *riti* or formalistic mould or should we say that *Ravan and Eddie* is of the *riti* type and *Cuckold* the *pratikriti*, the 'anti-realistic' type that Nemade spoke of? To me, quite clearly, neither *Ravan and Eddie* nor *Cuckold* belong entirely to the *riti* mode. While they are both experimental in form and experimentation implies *riti,* and not necessarily social engagement, there are important ways in which both these novels do engage with society. *Ravan and Eddie*'s discussion of the Hindu–Christian question is almost prophetic in the manner in which religious intolerance has been manipulated in the last few years. The novel not only opposes such intolerance, but demonstrates how ridiculous and unfounded it is. It shows that identities are not just hybrid and complex, but susceptible to crossovers and interchanges. It also demonstrates how communities that live next to each other not only display compatibility and coexistence, but actually interpenetrate and become the *other*. The *other* and the *self* – this dialectic is

very important in *Ravan and Eddie* – and plays itself inside out. Eddie himself, to attain his self's other, becomes his other's self – he joins the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), becoming one of its staunchest members! This move is of course shown in a comic and parodic fashion, which is to say that all these identities are very flexible and interchangeable, not rigid and essentialized.

Again, in *Cuckold* there is an engagement with the manner in which India has been shaped and formed during the medieval times. Nagarkar underscores the claim that it is the Battle of Khanua, where Babar defeated Rana Kumbha, rather than the Battle of Panipat in which Babar defeated Ibrahim Lodhi, that is more important to the rest of Indian history. If *Ravan and Eddie* is about Hindu–Christian relations, *Cuckold* is about the Hindu–Muslim contact. Nagarkar, once more, resists simplistic notions either of difference or identity, weaving, instead a complex narrative of how both individuals and collectives function denominationally. He invites us not to simplify history, but to reengage with it imaginatively. *Cuckold* is an experiment of how to participate in our past; indeed, memory and its workings constitutes one of the important themes of the novel. How do people construct and preserve their past? How do they narrativize it? The novel asks us to think through such questions. In the figure of Sajani Bai, Nagarkar, perhaps, portrays a character who functions as a writer such as he might, someone who sings and immortalizes our past, not necessarily in the way it happened, but its essence, its mood, its feel, its inner quality, so that we don't forget. If this is not social engagement, then it is difficult to find anywhere.

Nagarkar's latest novel, *God's Little Children* (2007) is very ambitious, but ultimately unconvincing either as an original or insightful analysis of terrorism or as a story. Reminding of a Dan Brown type of story, it traverses several continents and places, but ends up sounding like a potboiler rather than a serious artistic creation. One might sympathize with the author's attempt to engage directly with one of the key issues of our times in order to write a big and brilliant book, but the result is not satisfactory. Sections of the novel are beautifully written and memorable, but the central movement, with the same character becoming a terrorist of three different faiths is too far-fetched, even if he meant it as a metaphorical device.

That is why, in closing, I would like to return to what I said about the special kind of literary modernism that Nagarkar helps to engender. It is here that I think we can place his contribution most accurately vis à vis the tradition of recent Indian fiction. The best way to do this would be comparative, to place him alongside the other members of the quartet of contemporary bilingual modernists of Maharashtra. It is the study of this quartet; Chitre, Kolatkar, Nagarkar and Sarang that will give us some idea of the special kind of literary modernism that was produced in Bombay. All these writers are cosmopolitan,

experimental, irreverent, even visionary, but in ways that are substantially different from the Anglicist modernists. The latter debunk their own traditions, deriving their styles and content from Western sources. Unlike them, the Bombay quartet, mines Indian sources and therefore creates a modernism that is neither alienating, nor derivative. They are Indian and modern in an unusual and interesting way. This also makes them different from several vernacular modernists, who have been shown to be derivative too, even though they write in Indian languages. Incidentally, the first three are also Chitpavans, though outsiders to their own milieu. Comparing these writers would be a most fascinating subject for a doctoral dissertation. We have four bilingual writers – primarily, two poets and two novelists. (Of course Sarang is also a poet.) It would be fascinating to see exactly how the Marathi and the English combine, coalesce, collude, conflict and clash. Ultimately, if *God's Little Soldier* fails, I think this is because it departs from this context of bilingual modernity that actually defines Nagarkar's art. The more anglicized and cosmopolitan he tries to become, the less convincing he is.

I would, however, like to end by pointing out that much still needs to be done before we can do justice to a writer of Nagarkar's caliber and stature. A serious writer may spend seven or eight years writing a book like *Cuckold*. How can we hope to be fair to it in the space of a few pages? Often, we are ill-prepared for such a work. Indeed, I wonder how many people have read this book seriously, the way it deserves to be read and savoured. Perhaps, a hundred? Perhaps, even less. No wonder that this text belongs to 'another canon'; as far as I know, it has never been prescribed or taught in the class room. It is simply too difficult a text to teach in a BA or MA class just as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is. What I have offered here, then, is merely the beginning of what ought to be a more sustained engagement with Nagarkar's oeuvre.

# 12

# STEPHANIANS AND OTHERS: A Tale of Two Writers

Though this is a nation of more than one billion, with reputedly very large numbers of English speakers and users, the catchment area of Indian English novelists seems to be very narrow. A few dozen schools and less than a handful of colleges seem to have produced most of these writers. Of all these institutions, none is as famous or important as St Stephen's College, Delhi, which has been the alma mater of more notable Indian English writers than any other single institution. So much that there has been talk of a Stephanian school of literature.[1] I think this issue needs to be addressed because it goes into the heart of this literature, particularly in helping us understand the kind of elitism that fashions and determines it. As an alumnus of this College myself and a contemporary to some of those who went on to be important writers I might have an insider's view, if not a personal stake, on this question.

The first part of this chapter will address whether or not there is a Stephanian school of literature. In order to do this I shall try to describe, in a necessarily personal way, what it was like being a Stephanian in the late 1970s. More specifically, I shall attempt to try to understand the relationship between the cultural ethos of the college and its effect on the personalities of those who studied there. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I shall try to extend some of these observations to the larger cultural politics within which contemporary Indian English fiction is written and read. Finally, in the last

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was commissioned by *The Stephanian*, the journal of the college, appearing under the title 'The Stephanian School of Literature? Some Objections and Clarifications' (December 1994). It was later republished, with some modifications, in the book *The Fiction of St. Stephen's* edited by Aditya Bhattacharjea and Lola Chatterjee (Ravi Dayal, Delhi, 2000). Some of the better known Stephanian novelists include Gopal Gandhi, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, I Allan Sealy, Anurag Mathur, Mukul Kesavan, Rukun Advani and Sagarika Ghose. *The Stephanian* Vol. 52, No. 2 of December 1994 contains a full listing of them.

part of the chapter, I reminisce about a leading writer with whom I had the privilege of studying, Upamanyu Chatterjee, in order to make broader observations about the kinds of fiction we write.

## I

Before trying to answer the question 'Is there a Stephanian school of literature', some related questions must be confronted. What do we mean by 'Stephanian'? How is a 'school of literature' defined or constituted? And what sort of 'knowledge' do we hope to produce out of such an enquiry? In addressing these questions, I cannot help recalling that the most obvious, if not dominant, aspect of the Stephanian ethos is self-conscious elitism. Even this very question of whether there is a Stephanian school of literature or not was first raised by the College Magazine itself. In fact, after I entered College in 1977, I noticed quite quickly that St Stephen's was exceptional not only because it contained an enormous concentration of intelligent, creative, talented and privileged students from various parts of India, but because everyone who studied here was made conscious of how special College was and programmed to carry on this sense of self-congratulation throughout their lives. We were all taught to believe that we were different and therefore entitled to jobs, occupations and positions in the real world which were likely to correspond to our achievements and privileges as students. As far as the College itself was concerned, students might be forgotten after they left, but they were sure to be remembered once they made their mark in the world.

Even at the risk of sounding facetious, I would like to call this process – with due apologies to M N Srinivas – Stephanianization, de-Stephanianization and re-Stephaninization. This model bears unpacking because it may be extended to other privilege-maintaining institutional mechanisms, whether here or abroad. To begin with the last, re-Stephanianisation is activated as soon as an alumnus reaches any appreciable degree of eminence. Immediately upon such an elevation in the real world is a consequent reappropriation into the magical and self-sustaining logic of Stephanianism. Stephanianism, thus, is that dominant ethos of the College in favour of which the aforesaid process of Stephanianisation, de-Stephphanianisation, and re-Stephanianisation are invoked. Stephanianism itself is simply that process of self-definition, whereby the College and its denizens are identified as superior and special, in fact, the best in India. Further, if the signification and sign of this identification were to be specified, it is an ethos which worships success and identifies the College and its denizens with it.

I have watched how, during my own years as a student, several such appropriations were effected and celebrated. In fact, the moment a name came

up, say, that of a crusading editor who helped topple a state government or a famous bureaucrat, one would quickly be informed that he was a Stephanian. One would oneself in turn inform anyone who didn't know this when the occasion arose. In this way, a whole identity package was assiduously inculcated and maintained. What, then, was the essence of such a process of Stephanianisation? It was, as I said, the worship of success. To be a Stephanian was to be a winner. This remarkably self-promoting definition would be even more remarkable if what followed *sotto voce* or parenthetically was voiced – to be a Stephanian was to be a winner in a society of losers. There was, therefore, precisely that element of anxiety which informs such distorting self-definitions: we had to make it because otherwise we would end up being just like the others, just nobodies. Which brings me to de-Stephanianisation, the process of dis-association of a person with the College. Unlike the active and self-conscious process of Stephaninization, de-Stephanianization happened naturally, on its own, when a student's or alumnus' ordinariness simply let that person go unnoticed by the College and its keepers from its roll of honour.

Retention and maintenance of privilege is not an entirely harmonious or peaceful matter. Any elitist subgroup, conscious and desirous of preserveing its benefits, is usually anxious. The mythos of privileges and surplus elitism is also tied up with an elaborate self-justificatory process, it breeds its own ideologies of legitimation. For instance, when we went home for holidays, one of our pleasant tasks was to acquaint uninitiated relatives and friends with the mystique of St Stephen's. To questions such as 'How do you like your college?' whatever the answer given – whether 'Fine', or 'Very well, thank you' – the implication was always, 'But it's not any college, you know, it's St Stephen's'. If the questioner required further help he or she would be subjected to the pleasurable task of being made to understand just what made us special. Could a better way be found to illustrate this than the listing of eminent Stephanians in various walks of life?

For such a worthy enterprise even the (then) President or a somewhat unfriendly neighbour might serve usefully. Or the megastar who was the pivot of the Hindi film industry could be defined as the person who was refused admission to St Stephen's (it would quickly be added that his NRI brother was a Stephanian). Of course, the college of the superstar in question, reportedly Kirori Mal, has never to my knowledge shared any of this glory; had he been a Stephanian, a sure portion of his success would have automatically devolved upon his college. In this sense, it's hardly surprising, isn't it, that even in my own humble case, the earlier publication of this very essay was the outcome of my having qualified, by some generally acceptable yardstick, as 'an Indian English writer or critic'? The Stephanian, as I have always known him, likes to blow his or her own

trumpet, which is the one thing that makes him or her so detested by lesser creatures.

Now considering the fact that almost everyone who matters is a Stephanian anyway (at least so we were encouraged to think when we were undergraduates), would it not be most tempting and, oh so easy, for some Stephanians to christen their writers as 'the St Stephen's' – or, I should prefer the more characteristically collegiate usage, 'Stephanian' – school of literature? After all, who else do we have to convince? If we merely convince ourselves that such a school exists, then it will indeed exist. We, after all, are both the actors and the makers of the history, in this case the literary history.

But, it is this very ease that makes me pause before I close ranks with other old boys to reify the *Lal sitara lekhak mandali*, an awful-sounding Hindi translation of the Stephanian school of writers. All these disquietudes lead quite predictably, I think, to the issue of my own difficulties with considering myself a Stephanian. I am someone who studied in St Stephen's, but am not necessarily a 'Stephanian'. Lest I be misunderstood, let me hasten to add that I loved my years in College, that I am truly grateful for all that I received from it, which makes me as proud and loyal a former student as anyone else. But I would also like to believe that I have outgrown that narrow sense of identification with a particular institution which most of us ought to have outgrown by the time we ceased to be undergraduates. It was wonderful to be a Stephanian and to belong to College then, but now I see myself as a member of a larger community in which a majority of the people are quite unlike most of the Stephanians I know. If there is a 'type' known as Stephanian then I would rather not be one. Recently, I was actually complimented by someone in this respect, 'Oh, you went to St Stephen's, did you? I would never have guessed'.

To put it simply, there is much more to life than what I learned in College and there is much more to myself than who I was in College. This is no drawback or fault of College; in fact, it is probably a compliment to it in that it was College which truly inspired me to look beyond itself for a deeper and more meaningful relationship to the world I lived in. If so, I think this is the time to deconstruct stereotypes and reverse paradigms: to my mind, the 'real' or the 'true' Stephanian is one who is not merely a Stephanian. He is someone who recognizes and goes beyond the superficial stereotype of what he is expected to live up to. He goes on to discover and fashion his own identity in a world much larger than the College which nurtured him as a young student.

If this is accepted, then Stephanianism is more evident in an absence which permits the incorporation and accretion of several other, sometimes more pressing, identities than a central essence or metaphor which distinguishes its adherents from all others. Certainly, in my case St Stephen's has not been the

sole or even operative determinant of identity, but one among several contending and often contradictory inputs. If St Stephen's is not the dominant meaning-giver or the operative identity-marker, then to speak of a Stephanian school of literature is fallacious even with regard to those who have studied in College. That they all studied in College, then, becomes incidental, not crucial.

To my mind, a category such as 'Stephanian' makes sense only if it used broadly to include all those who have similar class and educational backgrounds, whose works share a similar outlook and cultural ideology. But if that is the case, wouldn't all those who didn't study in St Stephen's resent being included in this category? What gives us the right to impose on a whole generational trend the name of our college? Just as Pakistanis or Sri Lankans would resent being called Indians, I am sure Hinduites, Elphinstonians, Mount Carmelians, Xaverians, IITians, and alumni of other distinguished colleges would resent being labelled as Stephanian writers. To look at it in another way, Hindu College, just across the road, has produced at least two contemporary Indian English poets of note, Aga Shahid Ali and Sudeep Sen. There may be more. Should we then talk about a 'Hindu school of poetry', oddly sinister as this sounds? Similarly, I know that several graduates of St Edmund's College, Shillong, have published poetry. Is there, therefore, a 'St Edmund's school of poetry?' If Lady Shri Ram College (LSR) or Miranda House or Madras Christian College or Stella Maris or Presidency College or Loreto College or IIT Delhi – or any other such institution produces five or ten writers, should we start talking about a corresponding school of literature? The only reason why 'St Stephen's' as a category has proved both sticky and seductive is the fact that of all such institutions, it is St Stephen's that immediately evokes and represents the peculiar Indian English ethos that we are talking about. 'Stephanian', then can be a term as derogatory as it is definitive. If so, ought we to promote its strength and currency?

This brings me to the crux of the issue, which is who gets to be considered a 'Stephanian'? Who qualifies and who does not? Should someone who spent, say, one year in College, but didn't take a degree be included? Would Khushwant Singh, for instance, consider himself a Stephanian because he spent some months in College before moving on to Government College, Lahore, from where he obtained his degree? Similarly, is Ramesh Menon, the author of *The Hunt for K* and *Once a Blue God*, a Stephanian? He studied in College but dropped out. What if someone did his honours at Hindu and MA through St Stephen's or vice versa? Would he qualify? What about a persona like Ashok Vajpeyi who only came to St Stephen's during his MA which was merely a token affiliation academically? Is he too a Stephanian? What about those who didn't study in College but have taught there for long periods? Are they Stephanians? And what about those who were day scholars or who spent only

three as opposed to five years in College? Surely, though we are all Stephanians, some are more Stephanian than others.

Let me sum up what I have been trying to argue so far. To my mind, there is no Stephanian school of literature. But there are several writers – novelists, short story writers, poets and at least one dramatist – who studied in St Stephen's. Most but not all of them write in English. Many of them belong to one generation and went to College in the 1970s. In so far as all of these studied in St Stephen's there are bound to be some common features – more or less evident, more or less traceable – in their work. But if at all these features go beyond specifically College related things, then they are to be found more generally in a larger cultural matrix shared with several non-Stephanians. And the basic component of these common features would be a certain commonality of experience and a certain way of handling language, both of which were acquired during formative years in colleges like St Stephen's. To be more specific, these writers will all, in one way or another, write about the problematic of being anglicized Indians.

In many cases, there is a prior series of St Stephen's like institutions, for instance, Bishop Cotton Boys' School, Bangalore, and Madras Christian College, in my own, of which St Stephen's was the culminating point. Of course, this is not to obliterate the subtle but certain differences even between these institutions, all of which belong, as it were, to one Anglican, or should I say Anglicist, family. Though they together have made me Indian English or to reinvoke an older and more angular phrase – Indo-Anglian, much more powerful than all these has been the experience of living in a small, mid-western university town in the USA all through my MA and PhD. Paradoxically, if St Stephen's (and the institutions that preceded it), made me an Indo-Anglian and Anglophile, it was my sojourn abroad, in that mid-Western university, which was not just an academic experience, but a cultural, political, social, racial and spiritual one, that helped define what made me an Indian and myself. Yet, as with St Stephen's, once again, I have no particular desire to be identified with the institution in question, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Ultimately, if we were to enlarge the scope of our discussion, we would quickly realize the folly of any defining nomenclature for a group of diverse writers which relies exclusively on their graduating from a particular college or university. If we consider the number of writers who studied in Cambridge University, for instance, they would include about half the canon of English literature. But we wouldn't speak of a Cambridge school of literature unless they had much more than mere enrolment at the university in common. In fact, names such as 'the Oxford movement', 'the Prague school', or 'the Chicago critics' came into being not because the members studied at these respective institutions, but because they taught there and collaborated to produce a

coherent body of work with shared assumptions and goals. In the clear absence of any such coherence or cooperation, applying a similar naming strategy to Stephanians would be erroneous.

'Jokey irreverance, hybrid bilingual vocabulary, and intellectual liveliness', to cite Aditya Bhattacharjea's paraphrase of Rukun Advani, are characteristic not only of St Stephen's but to a larger group of colleges and institutions all over India. This does not mean that St Stephen's does not have a distinctive ethos, something which makes it different from other similar places. I have often thought of what it is – apart from the elitism, snobbishness and self-congratulation, which I have already derided. All these go to make up what one might call the 'bad' Stephanian.

The good Stephanian, on the other hand, uses all his privileges to evolve into a being of refined moral and intellectual sensitivity. The main ingredients of his sensibility would be decency, tolerance, fair play and a true liberalism which is both elitist and democratic. That is, it combines *noblesse oblige* with a certain humility. Behind this refinement of character is the especial Indian–English, Hindu–Christian (and earlier, Hindu–Christian–Muslim) synthesis which the Cambridge Brotherhood facilitated by instituting a college in Delhi on Cambridge lines. A certain blend of Indian Christianity was able to maintain and continue traditions which were originally instituted and periodically renewed by Englishmen of high aspirations and cultural values. Not the least part of the Stephanian ethos, is a certain respect for excellence, regardless of which field it manifests itself in. Absence of bigotry, crudity, vulgarity and vanity would also figure prominently in the making of such an ethos. In my opinion, such qualities of 'head and heart' might be more evident in the daily behaviour of a Stephanian than in the fiction or poetry some of us have written.

Yet, even with such defining characteristics as I have outlined above, there is no Stephanian school of writing to speak of, primarily because those Stephanians who went on to become writers did not consciously set out to espouse a set of values or styles in their work.

## II

I shall now turn to some more specific questions which come to mind when we discuss the 'Stephanian school' of writing. First, is this outburst of creativity limited to males? A simple answer would be that it will not be limited to males when more Stephanian females take to writing. If the 'Stephanian' is at all tenable as a descriptive term it is so, as I have already argued, in the broader sense of Indians with the same class and educational background. In that sense, there are already scores of new women writers whose education and literary proclivities are not all that different from those of Stephanians. As to women

in College specifically, they were readmitted only in the mid-seventies; even today, the men outnumber them. So it may take a while before their output matches that of the males.

But, perhaps, there is another reason for the dominance of males among the Stephanian writers. St Stephen's remains a male-oriented college, even though it is now coeducational. The attitude of males and females to careers and professions is also somewhat different. For some women, College is arguably a finishing school that will help them find good partners or equip them for an advantageous matrimonial alliance later. But for most males, it is their stepping stone to success and fame in the real world. The males thus tend to have higher motivation not just to excel, but even to survive, so tough is the competition. With every other student being a 'topper' from wherever he or she has come, to do well in College is not easy. The achievement-orientation of the males combined with a masculine ethos of the College encourages men writers, it would seem, than it does females. Of course, there are some male students who either because they are lazy or well-off (or both), consider St Stephen's to be not so much a launching as lounging pad.

The second question is what was special about the 1970s, which engendered most of these Stephanian writers? This I think is a more interesting issue. Again, its concerns cannot be limited to those who studied in St Stephen's. For instance, David Davidar, who studied in the South and Tarun Tejpal, who was in Chandigarh, belong to the same generation, though they did not go to College. A number of the new writers are in the late thirties, forties or early fifties today. This means that they were born roughly between 1950 and 1970. This fact, in my opinion, chiefly signifies the birth of a new generation of writers. Since they were all being formed in the 1970s, the seventies become a decade that shaped them. That decade is also crucial for certain political and social events – the Emergency of 1975, for example, when Indira Gandhi suspended the Constitution and curtailed civil liberties. The fight against the Emergency and the reassertion of Indian democracy were very crucial to the history of independent India. Even prior to the Emergency, College was marked by the rise of Naxalite idealism, inspired by which a few Stephanians actually left to work in villages. Even those who stayed back became politically Left wing. Joining the IAS or a multinational corporation did not change them ideologically.

By the end of the 1970s, the possibilities of a new kind of Indian English literature was in the air, though not consciously perceived. Certainly, there was an emergence of a wider, more stable, and at the same time hugely democratic Indian English community. Indian English was no longer as quaint and exotic as it seemed to be earlier. More and more people were not only reading, writing and speaking English in India, but there was a new confidence

in their use of the language. There was also an exponential growth in the print media and, in the publishing industry, and above all, in the foreign market, in the 1980s. This last factor was, in my opinion, the single most vital in the 1970s' students becoming authors. Suddenly, we found that our work was viable, that we could find publishers for it. This in turn encouraged others, who might have ended up mere scribblers and dabblers, to pursue their creative interests more seriously.

A similar phenomenon worked in the Indian Institutes of Technology twenty years later, in the 1990s, with a number of writers suddenly emerging from among those who studied during this decade. What matters is a critical mass and a coming of age in a language. With St Stephen's, a critical mass became visible in those who studied in College in the 1970s, with the IITs this happened later. In other words, the creative upsurge has moved on elsewhere from St Stephen's. While it is a bit too premature to conclude that the spring dried up after the 1970s, it does appear as if the same degree and level of creativity is not evident at present. The next generation in College, which studied there in the 1990s or 2000s, is yet to show similar promise.

A related question that is often asked is why did the novel become the genre of choice? This, I think, is easily answered. Fame, circulation, currency (pun intended). The novel has been the principal Indian English genre since the 1930s. There is little likelihood of this changing. Moreover, literary genres are not mutually exclusive. Several novelists have also been poets and vice versa. Though I consider myself primarily a poet, for example, I have published a collection of short stories and a novel. Similarly, Gopal Gandhi has published a long play in verse called *Dara Shikoh* (2004), in addition to two novels. Being a novelist does not preclude one from being a poet or a dramatist; likewise, poets and playwrights may also write fiction without ceasing to be poets. Yet, it is the novel that is, without question, the dominant form.

It is, however, true that fewer Stephanians have made their mark in poetry than in fiction. One reason is that it is more agonizing, more unrewarding and utterly lonesome to be a poet than a novelist. Poetry does not sell; it can barely survive. Moreover, to write significant poetry is perhaps harder these days than to write tolerably competent fiction. Indian English poetry is still very much a minority discourse, seldom taken seriously by the Indo–Anglians themselves, let alone by other Indian poets, who simply detest it. Moreover, why must Stephanian writing be confined to fiction or, at the most, to fiction and poetry? What about criticism? Considering the number of Stephanians in the academy, we are sure to have a very rich 'Stephanian school' of humanistic and social science scholarship. *In An Antique Land* (1992), for instance, is supposedly non-fiction, but is certainly a narrative. Narrativity is now recognized as integral to most knowledge systems. If so, we ought to broaden our definition of literature

to include non-fiction prose. There are bound to be many practitioners of this genre. A name which immediately comes to mind from my own contemporaries is that of Ramachandra Guha, who has written books on subjects as diverse as history, ecology and cricket. As I see it, generic sanctities, these days, are more often violated than upheld.

Speaking of poetry, I want to remember the time when I was a struggling undergraduate poet at St Stephen's. Of course, the struggle in poetry never ends. But in those days, I was never sure that I was or would be a poet. I suppose even today I can never be sure of the Muse's favour. Even after five books, the insecurity still remains. In those days, however, my anxieties were definitely more acute. There were four or five of us in College who wrote poetry regularly: Ajay Ahuja aka Astrel, K T Pradip, Aditya Malik, myself, and perhaps one or two others with whom we were not in touch. The one teacher–poet who encouraged us much was Vijay Tankha aka Tanks. The only incentive that College offered to poets was the M M Bhalla poetry prize, which was awarded once in two years. I think the competition during my three years at College was in my second year. There were only five or six entries. All the four aforementioned poets were contenders. Keshav Malik was the judge and K T Pradip got the award. As far as I know, none of us four except I, have gone on to publish their poetry collections. In fact, the only other contemporary I know of who has published a collection (by Writers Workshop, Calcutta) is Anna Alexander; she used to study History, and is the younger sister of the better known writer Meena Alexander.

As the founder and co-editor (along with Arjun Mahey) of *Lyric*, a really small quarterly magazine of creative writing, which we had priced at Re 1, I came across many young writers. Some, like Madhu Dubey who was in LSR and later taught in College, I thought were very good. Today she is a Professor in English at a leading university in the US. I am not sure she has continued writing poetry, though. I wonder why none of the others, including Tanks, have not yet published their collections. Even someone who was then considered an established poet, Rupendra Guha Majumdar, who taught at Ramjas, does not seem to have propelled his poetic career to the heights one had expected.

About my own art, I had no idea of where it stood. What was the worth of what I was writing? Though there were these few poets around and some teachers who would look at one's outpourings once in a while, it was so hard to get any genuine feedback. One day when I was particularly depressed – I think it was after I had failed to get the M M Bhalla Prize – some friends decided to cheer me up by agreeing to listen to my poems. One of them, I think, was Amit Tyagi, two years senior, and a cinema buff. After he extracted

a promise to restrict myself to half an hour, we repaired to the lawns outside Allnutt South. The reading over, I waited with bated breath for the verdict. 'Some of these poems are good, but you have to work much harder if you want to make it.' What I had just heard was by now so familiar that I was visibly disappointed.

'What do you want? Do you want to be told you're a great poet?' I said, 'No, no, of course not. I just want to know if I have it in me, if I'll ever be a poet'. Amit looked at me compassionately. 'Of course, you will.' 'When?' 'Well [...] by the time you're in your thirties...' Amit said, perhaps congratulating himself on his caution. He had deftly postponed the issue by nearly the same years as I had spent on the planet. 'Ohhh...' I groaned. 'Well? What's the matter now?' he asked. 'You mean I'll have to wait that long?' 'Let me put it this way, if you don't give up by then, you'll certainly be a poet.' This time, Amit certainly looked even more satisfied with the cleverness of his reply. 'What about the others? I mean all of these chaps?' I was referring to some of my 'co-poets'. Amit laughed. 'Oh, them? How many years will you give them?' he asked the third person who was with us. The latter replied, 'Just a couple of years after College...'

There was something so frightening and gloomy about these predictions. That most of our endeavours and dreams would come to naught as a hard lesson for an eighteen year old. It was equally hard to imagine persisting with poetry for another fifteen years before its bearing any fruits. I decided not to let our foray into literary futurology break up without extracting some sort of guarantee, however fake or self-delusive. 'Let's take a bet', I said to Amit, 'let's see if I do make it as a poet after I'm thirty'. 'What'll you give me if I'm right?' he asked. 'Anything you like.' 'Actually, you won't even remember I said this to you.' It was Amit's turn to look a bit gloomy. 'I will, I will.' I readily retorted. 'Let's take a bet on that...' Amit said, turning back as he walked away. Today it's my turn to wonder if he remembers or if he's aware of my public acknowledgement of his support. But what Amit did not warn me about is the void, the lack of recognition or appreciation, that a poet has to face even after being published.

But the really remarkable thing about writing poetry during those college days is that of the poems I wrote then, quite a few still remain. Some have actually found their way in my collections, *The Serene Flame* and *Used Book*. Others were published in miscellaneous journals or periodicals. In addition, there are several poems which draw upon my experiences during those three years. One, 'Your Fallen Profession', the only one actually set in College, was published in *World Literature Today* (Vol. 68.2, Spring 1994) in their special issue, 'Indian Literatures: in the Fifth Decade of Independence' and included in my third collection *Used Book*.

### III

## The Tale of Two Writers

I want to end this last section of my book with some reminiscences of Upamanyu Chatterjee, today a major Indian English novelist. My first memory of Chatty, as he was called, is his sitting on the footpath near the St Stephen's bus stop. It must have been my second day in college. I am reasonably certain about this because I distinctly remember how he missed the first day of classes. 'I've been through all that crap once before', he said in his wry, characteristic way, about the orientation and other introductory rituals. I learned that he was senior to our batch by a year because after one year of doing History (Hons.), he had decided to begin afresh with English. 'Don't worry, I won't rag you fatche', he said disarmingly. 'I got fed up with doing History', he explained, 'I realized that I always wanted to do literature'. That struck a sympathetic chord in me because I too had, after a year of doing PCM (Physics, Chemistry, Math) for my Pre-University – and scoring very high marks – had realized that as far as I was concerned, it was literature or bust.

But very soon I realized that Chatty was not only quite different from me, but from everyone else in class. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted, while the rest of us were groping about. Chatty largely kept to himself, hardly participating in the routine activities of the college. He kept to his closed circle of friends and he pretty much stayed away from everyone else. He had already 'given up' on many of the 'trips' that normal Stephanians went on. In fact, he did his best to hide his talents, which were not confined to literature, but extended to debating, quizzing and cricket. In fact, he had all that it took to become a 'cat', a highly visible and sought after Stephanian, but studiously avoided becoming one. 'I don't know what's happened to him', one of his high-school classmates once confided, 'At Xavier's he was not just the Head Boy, but ahead in everything, including cricket'.

At St Stephen's Chatty had decided to keep a low profile, almost as if to save himself for what he knew to be his life's true mission. He kept up a very good academic record for purely practical reasons. In one of the KTs (*Kooler Talk* was a typically Stephanian rag, irreverent and catty) that he'd helped to edit, he'd attributed a remark to me which might as well have applied to him: 'Man, the only way out of the system is Marks!' (the pun on Marx was of course deliberate). Indeed, KT and the Woodhouse Soc. were the only things he seemed to take interest in. He helped bring out an incredibly funny issue of the former, a good bit of it lampooning me, and as the latter was more or less defunct, he won the only Woodhouse Soc. debate which was ever organized during our tenure at College. I think he had suggested the topic, I had organized the debate, and the total number of participants was three!

I began to take Chatty seriously early in the first year when one of our teachers, the dapper Nikhilesh Bannerji, read out his answers to our first class test. Chatty had written a very witty answer on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which was a prescribed text for our first year. What struck me about his script was not just his answer, but his handwriting. It was mannered, stylish, almost beautiful, but slightly phoney. That, I thought, was a valuable clue to the persona that he had cultivated. But, in the early days of our contact, what really stunned me was just how erudite Chatty was.

When I entered College, I thought everyone was like me, with a similar range of previous reading. I thought of myself as a typical prospective student of English Honours. That was farther from the truth than I had expected. Most people in the course were woefully ill-read. Some had actually perused little other than Archie comics and Harlequin romances. A few had a smattering acquaintance with Victorian novels, which they proudly called classics. It turned out that I was most unlike them. I had not only read Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Hardy, but also Woolf, Orwell, Huxley, Sartre, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Camus, Kazantazakis, and many other 'interesting' authors. I began completely to reverse my opinion of myself vis-à-vis my classmates. In fact, I jumped to the opposite conclusion that I was the most well-read of all my classmates. Once again, I was proven wrong. Chatty was ahead of me, way ahead. He had not only read what I had read but much, much more. He had read Grass, Marquez, Neruda, Paz, Naipaul, Achebe, Proust, Joyce, Salinger, Golding, and Borges, only half of whom I was familiar with. In other words, Chatty had read the moderns as thoroughly as I had read the classics. In addition, he had read a lot of modern literature in translations too. Apropos Chatty's future as a writer, there are a couple of very vivid interactions we had towards the end of our BA (Hons.) which are most memorable. One occurred sometime in January or Feburary of 1980. It was a classmate's birthday party, hosted by her boyfriend in his plush Jorbagh house. I remember the huge double doors of solid teak and our host answering the bell himself. The doors opening into a nice atrium, lined with plants. The birthday girl was looking really gorgeous as only eighteen year olds can. All of us so young, so innocent, so full of life. And I, with my perennial confusions and uncertainties. There was dancing and booze, so many people, right on the threshold of life. The whole atmosphere had a strange, almost magical air to it as I think about it today.

Chatty and I found ourselves facing each other. We both had had a couple of drinks. Chatty had always been an enigma to me. We never levelled with each other completely, though I am sure we respected each other. What had always affected me was the fact that he knew exactly what he wanted out of life. That was truly extraordinary for someone of his age. In contrast, I had no definite career plans; the future was still dim and hazy. When you want the

whole world you are unable to be content with a modest ambition which you know is really sufficient for you. I wanted to do too many things: study, go abroad, write, enter politics, earn money, enjoy sensual pleasures, become enlightened – all of these contradictory drives and desires. So much thirst for life, so wasteful to the spirit.

Chatty knew that I had gotten admission to graduate school in the US, what is more, with full financial aid. He said very gently, 'Now you must feel quite secure about your future, no?' I said, 'Well, I must admit that I am happy. It'll be a relief to get out of India. It's not that I don't love India, but right now it seems very limited and cramped. You know I didn't want to do an MA in English at Delhi University just like everyone else. Now I don't have to worry, at least not immediately [...] Later, I don't know. I suppose my anxieties will return. But what about you? What are your plans?'

He looked at me and gave a mysterious little smile. 'I'll try my luck at the civil service exams.'

'But, surely, Chatty, that can't be your ultimate aim in life. I know you too well to believe that.'

'Why not? It gives you a good career. Job security. That's very important. And if you are reasonably clean and honest, you've done your bit for the country. I think I will take the Maharashtra cadre. What do you think?

We both laughed. Chatty told me his real ambition. He wanted to be a writer. The IAS would not only be a respectable career, but it would give him spare time to write. That's when I remembered what Chatty had told me over two years ago when I had complimented him on his vast reading that he wanted to write. I had not taken him seriously then. He had said 'I read all this because I had to learn the tradition of modern fiction; after all I have to start where these guys leave off'.

The next conversation which we had on the subject was even more strange and eventful. It seems almost unreal now, like vignettes from another dimension. Yet I know that such events are not only real, but happen in everyone's lives. That was one of the last meaningful conversations Chatty and I had. It was a few weeks before our exams. We barely saw each other a few times then, parting at the end of the University exams, only to meet briefly fourteen years later in 1994. So this was like our last conversation together. Both of us were standing near Kashmiri Gate. We were waiting for a bus to go back to College, I think.

'You didn't tell me what you really want to do', Chatty said to me. 'My problem is that I'm not sure', I said. 'Perhaps, I'll do a PhD, but I so hate to be a critic and hate criticism too...' 'Actually, you'll make a very good critic. I am sure of it', Chatty replied quietly.

'It's funny how people have started planning careers for me', I said not without a note of irritation creeping into my voice. 'An ancient female writer

said I'd make a good publisher. And all because I spent so much time reading her story and telling her what I thought was good about it.'

'There, that's criticism', Chatty responded, as if to clinch his argument. I suddenly felt alarmed. We both seemed to be confronting our destinies. The powers above seemed to be listening.

Chatty had already declared his avowed vocation of becoming a writer. What is more, his wish seemed to have been granted. Now my fate was being decided. And here I was, almost on the verge of settling for the lesser thing, becoming a paltry little critic.

Almost as if to extricate myself I said with unnecessary acerbity, 'Oh, I so detest critics. They seem to be like maggots feeding off the carcasses of writers.'

Chatty flinched. I had hurt him. 'Well, what do you want?' he asked at last. 'Why, I would like to be a writer too. I mean, besides being a critic.' He looked at me seriously. Then he looked away. None of us said anything. Kashmiri Gate seemed like a part of a ghost city, totally unreal, woven in gossamer. I felt a spooky sensation, as if something very momentous were about to be finalized. 'All right', Chatty said softly, 'Are you happy now?' I looked at him incredulously. 'What makes you think that you're in a position to give out boons today, O mighty one?' We both laughed, but the little residue of unease remained. I said again, 'But you know how critics are, dissecting, analyzing every word, every image, all of which is so childish, so self-serving. Writers don't respect critics, you know.' Chatty merely smiled a superior sort of smile. 'Why are you smiling?' He said nothing. 'Please, please tell me.' 'Are you sure?' 'Of course. What is it?' 'Well, you will be a writer, but...' 'But?' 'But I mean, I'm not sure if you'll be...' 'What?' 'A very successful one [...] at least immediately. I think you'll get more mileage as a critic.' Strangely enough, I experienced a peculiar kind of relief. Was it because he hadn't said that I would end up becoming a bad writer? Not being very successful didn't seem to me to be such a bad thing after all. I said, 'Hey, that's ok. After all, one can't succeed at everything, can one?' Later, after all these years, how badly have I craved for precisely that kind of success.

By the time we left College, Chatty was already planning his novel. I found his single-mindedness and dedication quite incredible. He even took notes from me about how boys in Anglo-Indian schools talk, when he discovered that I had studied in one of them. He asked me to mimic their speech, then said, 'I hope you don't mind it if I use these dialogues in my novel [...] without acknowledging you.'

The whole thing seemed absurd to me. We, sitting on the footpath outside college, just after our BA (Hons.) finals, having this amazing conversation.

I looked at him with utter disbelief. Frankly, I didn't think he was ever going to write his novel. But I said, 'Sure, sure, go ahead, use it any way you like'.

I must admit, though, that knowing him, I couldn't laugh him off as easily

as I might have any other person. He was dead serious; I knew that one day he might actually use those notes. I didn't believe him then, but in the year 1988 he and I were the first ones from the St Stephen's class of 1980 to publish our first books – his was *English August* (1988) published by Faber and Faber, which won him instant acclaim and celebrity. Mine was *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry*, badly published by a Delhi house, for which I got no royalties and hardly any renown.

But what was truly astonishing is that Chatty's career had evolved almost exactly as he had predicted. He not only cleared the Civil Services exams, but got into the coveted Indian Administrative Service, opting for the Maharashtra cadre just as he'd told me. What is more important, his first novel was published before he was thirty.

Many years later, as I look back, I begin to see a pattern in our two writing careers. Though our reading had overlapped and though we were in the same college, we were actually developing along very different, even opposite lines. My tendencies were romantic, his were classical, my predilection was tragedy, his comedy. Not just that – the root of the differences lay elsewhere, in categories which the West failed to supply. For instance, I was going traditional, even spiritual, wishing to excavate the premodern past of India for answers to our deepest queries. He, on the other hand, was moving to a sort postmodernity, where the idea of civilizations or nations wasn't very important. During my years abroad, I was going towards Gandhi; he had no use for such sanctimonious clap trap. His *rasas* were satire, irony – *hasya* and *vibhatsa*; mine were surely *sringara* and *veerya* and ultimately *adbhuta*. I was spiritually oriented, he seemed to be pragmatic, even hedonistic.

These differences came to a head in a very peculiar exchange of letters, the only bit of correspondence really, between us. When I was in the US, a graduate student, pursuing a PhD on 'Mysticism in Indian English Literature', he suddenly wrote me a letter. Or was it I who wrote to him first? Perhaps, that's what happened: I heard that he'd got through the IAS and wrote him a letter of congratulations. It was a rather conventional letter because we'd been out of touch, but I didn't fail to mention how uncannily he'd predicted his own success to me. Now, it only remained for him to write his great novel. The latter point I, however, neglected to mention, thinking that he'd tell me himself if there was anything on that front. I got a rather strange reply that was as irreverent as it was scatological.

Amazingly, all along he had continued his writing. His first book, a much acclaimed novel, appeared in the same year as mine; only mine was a revised version of my PhD dissertation! He was the writer and I the critic, just as he had predicted. The most remarkable thing about Chatty was not what he aspired

to be but how exactly he had achieved it. He had done precisely what he had predicted.

*English August* made him a celebrity and a cult figure. None of his subsequent books has had a like impact. The novel was a great success; it was widely reviewed in the international press. Its cinematic adaptation, for which he wrote a brilliant screenplay, has been equally acclaimed. I have taught *English August*, both the novel and the film, in my class. I have also guided an MPhil thesis on this text. I think it is a very important book which needs to be read against the grain. Not only does it celebrate the life and times of Agastya or August, but it also critiques and satirizes both him and the class that he represents. The journey to rural India, almost like the descent into Hades in a classical epic, occasions both self-knowledge and transformation, albeit limited. Agastya, like his legendary namesake, brings water to the impoverished tribal villagers, his one meaningful act as an IAS probationer. His experience during the Durga Puja that he attends when he returns to Delhi on a break shows us that despite the severe anglicization, Agastya's cultural roots are deeper than he realizes. But, I won't discuss Chatty's work at length here, since I am trying to remember him as a person. I can only say that I know that Chatty is a very talented and important writer.

Chatty is the one person who knew what he wanted from life, asked for it, and got it. Everything else was secondary to him. His priorities were very clear from the beginning. A year after Chatty's second novel, *The Final Burden* (1993), I published my first book of short stories, *This Time I Promise It'll Be Different* (1994). Much of the book is about the process of writing itself. It is somewhat experimental in that it has several different kinds of stories, but rarely have I been satisfied with the quality of writing that I was able to achieve.

The following year, Rupa & Co published my first novel, *The Narrator*. I had tried to market it abroad, but had failed. I never penetrated the complexities of the Anglo–American publishing scene. Agents refused to meet me and returned the sample chapters that I had sent. One or two were sympathetic and wrote me replies. But I realized that I was doing something wrong, that my novel was not really marketable in the 'real world' out there. In India, my book had a lukewarm reception. There were a dozen or so reviews, but it faded away rather quickly. I was not entirely happy with *The Narrator*, though I believe that it has much more going for it than some of its reviewers have thought. I had attempted it more like an exercise than a real work of art. Interestingly, while Chatty's best known book was his first, I believe that my career has not yet peaked. This belief has kept me on the edge in trying to keep pushing my creative and critical boundaries.

After all these years, I think a certain clarity is also emerging in my artistic and critical outlook. For instance, the more I read, the more weary I become of modern and postmodern literature, which has completely dominated the literary world for more than a hundred years. Or, to put it in another way, I have become weary of the way in which this literature has been read and understood. Perhaps, the real significance of this literature is that it points to the road not worth taking, the path which leads to violence and disintegration, to suicide and mental illness, to conflict and decadence, to alienation and self-destruction.

*The Narrator* was my experiment at trying to write a postmodern, contemporary novel. I failed but understood why only later. The kind of novel I need to write would be neither modern nor postmodern or, for that matter, neither traditional at all. It would be quite unlike the work of my contemporaries. It is not as if I am saying that the best of the contemporary writers have missed the boat. What we have tried to depict actually shows own helplessness and turmoil. It reflects the distortions of our times. But rather than focus on the deformations, would it not be better to try to go to the depths of our selves to the continuing presence of that which is the whole, the integral? Mahatma Gandhi said, 'All true art must help the soul to realize its inner self' (55). If so, then there is a lot that the writers of our times still need to accomplish.

The idea of the inadequacy of our writing may be found in an entirely different source as well. V S Naipaul, writing in *A Writer's People* (2007) from a modern, displaced, colonial, now metropolitan standpoint asks if recent Indian English literature may be 'seen as a part of a new Indian literary awakening matching Bengal's of a hundred year ago, helping India understand now to understand its more complicated self' (192)? Certainly Salman Rushdie seemed to think as much in his boastful Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, which I have already alluded to in a previous chapter. Naipaul has a different take. He asks, do these books 'belong more to the publishing culture of Britain and the United States' (*Ibid.*)? The latter question he categorically answers himself:

> no national literature has ever been created like this, at such a remove, where the books are published by people outside, judged by people outside, and to a large extent bought by people outside(192).

Contrasting contemporary, mostly diasporic Indian writers with the great Russians of the nineteenth century, Naipaul continues: 'Indian writers, to speak generally, seem to know only about their own families, and their places of work. [...] The rest of the country is taken for granted and seen superficially...' (193). In an earlier paper 'Common Myths and Misconceptions about Indian

English Literature' I made precisely such a point, which it is gratifying to find Sir Vidia endorsing now:

> we cannot judge because what we know best about Indian writers and books are their advances and their prizes. There is little discussion about the substance of a book or its literary quality or the point of view of the writer. [...] The most important judgements of an Indian book continue to be imported'(192–3).

Naipaul, it seems to me, is pointing not just to a poverty of imagination in recent Indian English writing, but also to the as yet unfinished task of decolonizing the Indian mind that he expects some of this work to accomplish.

This brings me to the last sense, for the purposes of this book, of 'another canon'. The real canon, clearly, is yet to emerge and will be made up of books as yet unwritten or not fully discovered. That is because it cannot be constituted of 'failed' works, just because the project of modernity is a failure, or of second-rate work just because the Indian English mentality still remains colonized and derivative. Here, R K Narayan's *The Guide* is perhaps the best example of what a canonical work of our times may actually be like. Reclaimed by tradition, Raju, the protagonist dies for a noble cause after undergoing an inner transformation. By the end of the novel, his motivation has changed completely; he is now driven only by his desire to help others. The template for such a sacrifice is already available in the tradition, but now, it acquires a unique, contemporary agency. Not through assertive revivalism or chauvinistic recrudescence, but through irony and scepticism does Narayan show Raju, the ordinary, somewhat venial railway guide, turning into a real guru. *The Guide* succeeds because it can contain both modernity and its opposite, tradition, thus showing a way out of fake versions of both into an alterative and authentic Indian contemporaneity. Even the lesser known short story included here, 'A Horse and Two Goats', shows Narayan's ability to turn the apparent failure of cross-cultural communication into a successful narrative which, I am sure, communicates to both Indian and Western cultures. Narayan does so by fashioning an Indian English which can stand both for Tamil and for American English so that we the readers can understand both the characters who, as the story shows, cannot understand one another.

The other texts that I have discussed, perhaps, do not always succeed in enacting such a way out of both our creative and critical challenges, but this does not mean that they have not tried. *Conversations in Bloomsbury* shows an Indo–British encounter in which the weaker Indian position gradually gains

ascendancy. In *Comrade Kirillov,* Raja Rao, so much ahead of his times shows, with both courage and sympathy, how communism as an ideology cannot satisfy our deeper longings, let alone offer a practical solution to our social problems. *The Silver Pilgrimage* bypasses the modern problem by being located in the past. *Rich Like Us* shows the failure of democracy and human rights in India, but its protagonist, somehow saves herself by escaping to the West. In contrast, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, non-fictional though it may be, is actually about how India heals, even those who come here from distant shores. 'Clip Joint' demonstrates the deep discontent that underlies modern, Western society. *The Golden Gate,* on the other hand, appeals to our sense of tolerance, celebrating alternate sexualities and second chances in its attempt to show the way to a more humane and ecologically sensitive society. *Journey to Ithaca* is about failed spiritual quests, but falls short to convince us that the quest is itself futile. *Cuckold,* though medieval in setting, injects modern problems into a complex narrative structure, thus ending up being a very contemporary book.

Not all these books help us realize our 'inner self', to go back to Gandhi's phrase, but many of them try to do so, and some actually succeed. The challenge is to read them in such a way as to show how, even when they fail, they still make an attempt that is laudable. It is this special way of reading that will help us recuperate another canon from the existing one if we cannot in fact create one.

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# Index